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The Bad Place And The Not Place

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THE BAD PLACE AND THE NOT-PLACE

By

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B.S., University of South Dakota, 2019

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

English Program
In the Graduate School
The University of South Dakota
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The members of the Committee appointed to examine
the Thesis of Andrew Maudal
find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Abstract

Hope & Despair: A Short Story Collection

Do we, as an audience, gravitate toward apocalyptic settings to connect with outlying characters that defy the odds to survive the impossible? Or is it instead to fantasize about what we would do without societal norms, without rules, and without anything to hold us back. In my writing, I endeavor to walk the line of absolute bleakness and hopeful change while focusing on the compassion forged through friendship.

Literary critics have long argued that society oppresses the lower class through laws, social upbringing, and cultural institutes. In youth a struggle forms within us between how we want our true selves to be and how society wants us to be. Looking at things in a different way, perhaps without having to worry about society oppressing us, we yearn to be the hero of our own story. In the dystopian genre, the freedom of action is constrained by the threat of some malevolent or natural force.

In both of my stories, the main protagonist struggles against an oppressive malevolent force that tries to constrain them. This ties in with my own life experience of being a victim of bullying throughout my pre-college years. Similarly, in human history there seems to be a constant trend of those in power oppressing those without power. From colonialism all the way up to totalitarianism and the resulting dystopia, the pattern repeats itself. The dystopian genre is both a place of dismal bleakness, as well as an inward reflection on the choices made throughout our lives. Why are humans so cruel to one another? Why is bullying so prevalent in society? Is there any hope for humanity's future? These are all questions I try to answer throughout my thesis.

Thesis Advisor:



Duncan Barlow

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The Dystopian Genre, a Look at the Chaos and Compassion Within: An Artist Statement

Many aspects influenced my eventual interest in the dystopian genre and the character struggles present within times of despair. During middle school and highschool I was relentlessly bullied for my awkwardness and lack of friends. When I first watched *Star Wars* I found myself more fascinated by the bad guys instead of the good guys. The imposing form of Darth Vader and the scarred visage of the Emperor piqued my interest far more compared to the fair princess and the dashing smuggler. When I played video games I found myself more drawn to strategy style games where I could decide the fate of my own nation and its people. I found similarities to my own tone of writing compared with other dystopian authors like Cormac McCarthy and George Orwell. Combining all of these influences together and I finally found the correct label for my preferred genre of writing: dystopian.

Preface: What is “Dystopia”

To define Dystopia it is best to start out defining its opposite; what is utopia? In Greek utopia’s roots are, “eu-” meaning good and “topos” meaning place, so a Utopia is therefore, a good place. On the other hand, “dys” means ill or bad, so a Dystopia is the opposite of utopia; a bad place. The first person to write about a utopia, Thomas More, did not use the “eu” prefix and instead chose to use the identical sounding “ou” prefix, meaning not or no. In effect, More describes a utopia as a not-place, somewhere that cannot actually exist as explained in the article “Between Dystopia and Utopia,” “The term utopia was coined by Thomas More and it etymologically signified a place which was a non-place... the common meaning of utopia; a place which is a good place but which also is a non-place” (Softing 705). While a utopia is a place that doesn’t exist, a dystopia is a place that is the antithesis to it, “Dystopia is utopia gone wrong, and dystopian spaces are associated with disease and destruction” (706). The relationship

between dystopia and utopia is similar to that of light and dark, where light is the absence of darkness and darkness is the absence of light. A dystopia is a “bad place” because it is perceived to be the exact opposite of a utopian “good place.” Even if the defining characteristics are diametrically opposed, the genre of dystopia cannot exist without elements of utopia and vice versa. In Thomas More’s *Utopia*, the so-called perfect society is created with dystopian oppression built into the system. Perhaps this was an effort by More to show that the cost of perfection is too high.

More’s *Utopia* also is an example of the Dystopian genre in itself because it contains a deeper moral message to the reader: “The aim of the dystopia as a genre has often been didactic and morality has played a central role ... things may go either right or wrong, depending on the moral, social, and civic responsibilities of the citizens” (Softing 708). By creating a sorrowing tale of how humanity ended up in a dystopia, readers realize that their decisions matter about how they can affect society. The most common threat in the dystopian genre comes from humanity itself, further reinforcing the idea of didactic moral themes: “the common theme is the quasi-omnipotence of a monolithic, totalitarian state demanding complete obedience from its citizens” (708).

Section I: Dystopian Elements in History

In the early colonial era, the British Empire sought to expand its sphere of influence and society across the world. This goal, in a nutshell, is what defines and makes imperialism what it is. Hannah Arendt in the article “Dystopian Interface of Totalitarianism and Colonialism” writes, “Expansion as a permanent and supreme aim of politics is the central political idea of imperialism” (qtd. in Whyte 85). The British Empire, in its imperial colonialism, fought

indigenous persons to claim territory to form its own empire. A prime example of a literary author following these steps is George Orwell, who started with the colonialist story “Shooting an Elephant” and moved to the dystopia of *1984*. Firas Al-Jabouri writes, “colonialism is a managerial system of economic and political exploitation, which he [Orwell] saw as a blueprint for totalitarianism;” furthermore, “the need for economic and cultural monopoly and social comfort through the decimation and deprivation of other weaker nations is the parent of all totalitarian evil” (85).

The idea of how man may react if society collapses directly relates to the more primitive animal instincts needed to survive. These animal instincts are still present in the modern day, the basic drive to thrive and survive, even at the expense of others, predator and prey. Thomas More’s character of Hythloday in the book *Utopia* warns of how easy it is for humanity to fall back on its violent nature, and remarks upon war as “an activity fit only for beasts and yet practiced by no kind of beast so constantly as man” (199). An example of human’s need for war is the industrialized military complex of America. American President Eisenhower warned of such a large and powerful entity operating within our democracy “This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is the new American experience ... We must guard against the unwarranted influence ... by the military industrial complex” (Eisenhower “Farewell Address”). This example is also present in the Orwellian *1984* where the Ministry of Truth declares to its people that it is now at war with Eurasia instead of Eastasia for no apparent reason. In the current world humanity has shown that it can be no different from animals, invading one another to ensure security, to keep resources and gain territory. In the article “Humans and Animals in Thomas More’s *Utopia*” Christopher Burlinson argues “Hythloday seems to imply not just the capacity to enjoy looking at bloodshed is something that

humans can share with animals, but also that it can dehumanize us, make us more like animals” (35).

More’s *Utopia* questions how far up or down the chain humans are relative to animals, debating whether a perfect society could feasibly sustain itself without baser “bestial” instinct “More’s text moves toward a discussion of whether we have souls. This in turn ... is seen as having ‘lowered the lofty nature of his soul to the level of a beast’s miserable body’ is regarded as a question of what it is that makes us human” (Burlinson 38). This question of what makes us human relates to the mental brainpower of an individual compared to something like a dog or an elephant and how we can perform complex reasoning and thought. We, as humans, have created a level of discrimination and hatred in our society that does not appear in the animal kingdom. Discrimination makes us both better and worse than animals, a juxtaposition that makes itself clear when looking at historical dictatorships that boarded on the edge of dystopian systems.

In *Utopia* More directly correlates man to animal, specifically his analogy of pre-industrial Great Britain’s populous as sheep

Your sheep, which are usually so tame and so cheaply fed, begin now, according to report, to be so greedy and wild that they devour human beings themselves and devastate and depopulate fields, houses and towns ...

More moves from describing nightmarish carnivore sheep ... to speak of the real sheep farming that was altering social conditions in England in the beginning of the sixteenth century ... The sheep are by turn imaginary and literal and thereby metonymy for the action of the enclosers ... The enclosers have themselves become beastly. (Burlinson 64-65, 28)

The earlier juxtaposition of humans being both better and worse than animals is exemplified by saying man is imbued with the gift of greater intelligence, yet that gift can also be a curse. A literary example of man's gifted curse/power is from Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant."

In this short story, Orwell's character must shoot an elephant because he is the imperial figure that must prove his imperial superiority. He struggles to go through with killing the elephant; however, since he is the one burdened with the power of his empire, he must kill the elephant "When the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom he destroys ... For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life trying to impress the natives" (Orwell 1). In this way Orwell's character acts like an animal, he must prove himself to be the strong alpha, the pack leader, and therefore the responsibility of shooting the elephant falls to him. Similarly, while he makes up his mind about whether to shoot the elephant or not, he mentions the crowd behind him, eager for the meat of the dead elephant, like a pack of wild hyenas waiting to feast. He describes the crowd as watching a spectacle, like that of the ancient Romans watching gladiators fight to the death. In this situation, is man better than beast?

Perhaps we as humans are no better than animals, as in my life I experienced the brutality of social darwinism that lives within every middle school and high school across the country. I always saw these places of education not as utopian academia, but as dystopian jungles where the strong bully the weak and everyone else struggles to survive. As I noticed these trends, my interest in Dystopia grew and I soon found myself making connections between Dystopian ideas and moments in my life.

Section II: My Life

My interest in dystopian themes mirrored the path that dystopian literature followed alongside the literary predecessors of dystopian literature. In my early childhood I played video games and watched movies that were authoritarian/empire focused such as *Star Wars*. Not only did *Star Wars* create a satisfying fantasy, it also showed the extent of a government becoming tyrannical and oppressive. The iconic “Imperial March” coupled with the wide shots of countless star destroyers made me feel a sense of excitement and intrigue not only for the Empire but for the Emperor himself. The idea of one man overseeing the fate of a country, nation or entire galaxy stuck with me as an inspiration for my early writing and interest. One of the first video games I remember playing often, *Stronghold 2*, was directly based on this principle of leadership and power. The game itself took place in a feudal world, which explained my other interest in fantasy, though its core principles relied on improving the lives of your peasants while waging war on enemy lords. This further defined my path of interest, specifically the relationship between the ruler and the people. This, naturally, led to a personal interest in World War 2, and specifically, how Hitler rose to power as leader of the Third Reich, similar to Palpatine becoming Emperor. The rise and fall of both men and their empires sparked a certain degree of interest toward the idea of totalitarianism and eventually Dystopia. The switch from my interest in fascist governments to disjointed dystopian societies started when I entered the figurative social jungle of middle school.

The societal norms of high school and middle school gave rise to my interest in dystopian ideas, specifically the frowned upon norm of bullying. These bullies may look like any normal teen, and they go to church and take out the trash like any kid, but they spend their free time bullying and harming others for their own amusement. In this way, my own character was developed while being directly bullied as did the notion that the physically gifted or beautiful

people had societal power. The combination of developmental stages of early to mid teenage emotions and mental growth and the corruptive power of bullying created unhealthy cycles of abuse that go on for years.

This power dynamic between bully and victim is one of three criteria to define modern day bullying according to the article, "Portraying Monsters": "Today the three criteria of aggressive intention, repetition and unequal power underpin most definitions of bullying" (Horton 208). In my case, and no doubt in many other victims' cases, repetition can happen not only throughout a whole school year, but also through the entire length of middle and high school. Some bullies develop during middle school, latching onto a victim and from there, grow bolder and more aggressive with repeated bullying. Even the transfer between middle school and high school won't save a victim from a bully, such as in my case where my bully went to the same high school as I did.

The lack of escape from a bully only further demoralizes the victim as the setting of high school and middle school act as an arena or prison for bullies and their victims. The prison metaphor is brought up by Horton when he looks into various studies on bullying across the world, "The social climate in schools promote bullying by structuring relationships around competition, dominance, and conformity, all the while confining students to social groupings that are not of their choosing in a prison-like space" (Horton 210). It is no wonder that as an only child, with limited friends and an awkwardness to my social interactions, I found myself dreading going to school. With how poorly I felt about my social relations and self confidence in the physical world, I instead turned to the internet for a way to safely express myself.

On the internet, walls are much easier to put up and bullies can be shut out with the click of the block button. It was a shield to interact with people on my own terms, without the forced

grouping of classrooms that put the bully and their victim in close proximity. It is little wonder then why some of the unfortunate like me turn to the internet to express themselves freely, of this McCarthy writes, “Today’s young adults were born in a digital age; young adults may identify with feelings of social isolation in these [Dystopian] novels due to their largely disconnected social lives. Most young adults’ encounters are online rather than face to face” (112). In the online world it is easy to become someone else, and outcasts like me are able to express themselves freely on sites tailored to creative expression.

In relation to my creative expression, I find myself mimicking my own life as I struggle to navigate between what society wants from me, how society created me, and how I try to create myself. My collective self formed from a variety of factors such as upbringing, school, etc; however, it was also influenced by the rising problems America faces in the 21st century; McCarthy writes, “Those forces [Dystopian Elements] include a broad loss of privacy, school shootings, an educational system that relies heavily on standardized testing and educational leaders suspicious of progressive pedagogy” (115). Before my time at the University of South Dakota, I found myself shaped by a fairly Orwellian school system, telling me how to properly sit down, be quiet, take notes, and test for twelve years. During this time, I was without power. I was a gear in the machine that turned and spun until I got spit out without any real knowledge besides how to sit down, shut up, and test. In this way I experienced how a “one size fits all” teenager template fails to accommodate those with mental disabilities who learn differently, the physically disabled and students, like myself, who fell victim to aggressors within the system.

Section III: Creative Works

In both my stories, I write my characters with a chance to go against the system, and come out on top. In “Delightful Dystopia,” Adom is forced to choose between his queen and his conscience, his external beauty and his internal self. He finds himself forced into a position where he can keep his outward perfection by sacrificing his inner morals by staying loyal to his queen. On the other hand, he can abandon the power that makes him beautiful in the eyes of every citizen. I think of Adom as someone who transformed from a bully into someone who uses compassion to gain friendship. He eventually chooses to venture away from the city and forsake his power over others. Adom decides to reject the norm of the strong and beautiful abusing the weak. He no longer sees strong or weak, instead he sees only his fellow citizens. The city and its practice of labeling of citizens as “undesired” act as a metaphor for how people can label others by their beauty, skin color, gender, or sexual orientation. Adom’s departure is akin to removing these judgements from himself. Similarly, at the end, he wonders about his exiled friend Mr. Grey, showing that he cares more for his friend than his status.

In “100 Below,” the main character, Delilah, is petite and beautiful while the alleged evil infecting everyone is fat and vile. The people in power like the overseer, Father Gungi and the rich miner barons are all pure from the infection due to their status. It is revealed later in the story that the evil Plague Father is actually trying to save humanity, not destroy it. In the Plague Father’s conversation with Delilah, he reveals that humans were the cause of their own demise. Through greed, cruelty, and violent nature, the humans who first discovered the Plague Father are the true evil. The ending speaks to my point in a more obvious tone than “Delightful Dystopia” by bluntly pointing out the cruelty between men.

The beautiful people, like the overseer and the rich elite, maintain their power through the use and abuse of a cult that worships the Plague Father. It follows the literal definition of

bullying. They abuse a power dynamic between the masses and those in power to repeatedly abuse outliers. Throughout the story Delilah, as an outsider, constantly flees from monks or inquisitors because she fears their cruelty. She knows the citizens will not step in to save her, neither will anyone in power, so she remains isolated. For most of the story, she is unable to rely on anyone. This eventually changes when she meets Dr. Barlow, and is temporarily saved. By the end of the story, Delilah is able to rely on the Plague Father.

In both of my stories' ending I try to achieve two goals. The first goal is I want both of my characters to find some form of acceptance or closure within themselves. The second goal is to fit my works into the genre. The first goal comes across clearer in Adom's case. He decides to leave the city because he realizes the queen is manipulating and abusing him. He accepts the situation for what it is, and then decides to move away from it. He begins a new chapter of his life without the lies of the queen polluting his morals.

In Delilah's case, she comes to the realization that evil and compassion are not mutually exclusive in humans. Throughout the story, she fears other people because of the evil reign they enforced. By the end of the story, Delilah starts to trust others since the evil influences were removed. She also realized that life can be changed for the better if everyone put aside their differences and learned to be compassionate. An example of Delilah's non judgemental compassion is when she has to choose whether to destroy the Plague Father. The two are as different as night and day. One is small, petite, and clean while the other is huge, obese and filthy. She sees the Plague Father as a monster at first: an abomination. Only when she listens to the Plague Father does she understand him differently, and puts aside her initial judgment. She ignores her initial judgments of the Plague Father's evil appearance and instead befriends him when she learns he is good. After the evil people in power are removed, the oppressive nature of

the city disappears. The city changes, in Delilah's eyes, becoming a beacon of hope instead of a place of repression and abuse.

Both Delilah and Adom change their situations by overcoming their initial judgements. Both of them start their stories as loners, outliers, and victims of bullying. By the end of their stories, they have overcome their bullies through the relationships they formed along the way. Despite both settings being extremely oppressive, compassion offers an opportunity for change. If people chose a little more inclusivity and a little less exclusivity then bullying wouldn't be so much of a problem. Beautiful people, or ugly people, both are the same in that they're both people.

I found achieving the second goal to be more difficult. In one way or another, both of my stories end with some rays of sunshine and hope. For Adom, he leaves the abusive queen in search of his friend. Delilah, on the other hand, finds a compassionate father figure whom she can now rely on. Although these rays of hope do exist, I made sure that the storm clouds of a doubtful future remained. Yes, Adom left the city and the abusive, manipulative queen. His departure, however, does not change the fact that the queen will still run the city in an oppressive manner. He is also outside the bounds of what he believes to be the last pocket of humanity. Ray of hope or not, he exiles himself to an unknown wasteland. Delilah, for her part, is inspired by her new father figure to put her trust in others. Plus, the city is no longer under the cruel oppression of the overseer or Father Gungi. Delilah and the rest of humanity must still struggle to survive despite what Delilah has done to better the city and herself. As much as Delilah's heart warms, the temperature of the planet did not. Similarly, the Plague Father did say it was possible to mutate humans to be resistant to the cold, but did not elaborate on the cost. The gift of his

infection gave people sores, rashes, boils and other gruesome side effects. A full mutation might have even more unhealthy side effects or fully transform humans into putrid creatures.

The role of ambiguity in my work relates to the author I consider to be my inspiration for the contemporary dystopian genre: Cormac McCarthy. Two works stand out to me as achieving a level of an ambiguous dystopic ending: *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*. Even though *No Country For Old Men* isn't set in a post apocalyptic world, I still think there is a huge undertone of dystopian influence. In relation to my work, *The Road* clearly mirrors a level of ambiguous bleakness. In the end of the book, the boy's father dies, and he is left as his own caretaker and guardian, mirroring Adom's position at the end of "Delightful Dystopia." Similarly, the apocalypse is not ended, the boy doesn't find sanctuary and the society is not rebuilt.

This idea of non-existent change ties into my belief of *No Country For Old Men's* dystopian undertones. At the end of that book, no one wins. All of the main characters are broken in some way or another. The main character, Llewelyn, experiences his own murder without any explanation given to the reader. The main antagonist, Anton, ironically gets into an unexpected car crash at the end of the book. The crash is ironic because Anton preaches the idea of fate and chance as the ultimate deciders of how we live or die. To him, there is little we control in what happens in our lives. Even Anton is not immune to this idea when he gets into a car crash. Finally, there is the other main character, Sheriff Bell, the dreamer of a better time. Bell is the character that I think is the dystopian representation in the book. Llewelyn's death and Anton's car crash do guide the reader toward the idea of dystopian bleakness, but Sheriff Bell makes it much clearer. Throughout the novel, Sheriff Bell is forced to confront gruesome murder scenes, death, and a non-existent 'happy' resolution. In the end, the bad guy is not arrested, the hero does not save the day, and the world is not a better place. Bell's despair of realizing that there never

was a prior “better time” and that the world has always been bad clearly relates to the genre of dystopia. What truly makes Bell shine as a character, in my opinion, comes from the realization that the ‘glory days’ of the past never existed. In the beginning he started as a Sheriff who looked back on the good old days, and constantly quoted the idea of a simpler time. By the end of the book, he realizes that such a time never existed, the ‘utopia’ he harkens back to never actually came into fruition. It reminds me of More’s alternate way of spelling Utopia: non-place.

The idea of a non-place is something that both McCarthy and I write about in our works. In McCarthy’s works, the endings are ambiguous and leave the reader with a lack of fulfillment. This lack of fulfillment represents the dystopia. The promise land is not the perfect place envisioned by some, nor the perfect ending where everything ties up. Instead, McCarthy’s writing reminds me of the non-place. The non-place is exemplified by the way humans are not always kind, nor are social relationships always easily maintained. The power dynamic between the haves and have not will always exist. We as humans make strides toward building a utopia, however they are made upon rotting wood. In actuality, all it takes is one misstep, one explosion of cruelty or hate for the human species to fall into a dystopia. To me, it is reason enough to believe More’s secondary spelling of Utopia, not as a good place but as a not-place.

Throughout history, my own life, and my creative works, the dystopian genre stands as a testament to the impossibility of making a non place. Human history has created plenty of power dynamics, be it through early colonialism, enslavement from imperialism or the rise of totalitarianism. In my life, I realized I was one of the have-nots when I entered middle school and all throughout high school. The unequal power dynamic presents itself as obvious in the form of the beautiful girls or athletic boys versus the ugly isolated outcasts.

There is some amount of hope in my work where I strive to show that not every challenge needs to be completed alone. Even if a situation is bleak, or someone feels like they're alone in the world, the opportunity for help remains. Compassion and acceptance between humans, or giant plague abominations, can make even the most oppressive, coldest situations a little less bleak. The future is unknown, and we cannot predict what will happen; all we can do is try not to repeat the past. With some amount of pessimism I hope that with enough time, and enough trust in mankind, we can succeed in earning Utopia's true definition; not a non-place, but a good-place.

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Delightful Dystopia

“Watch them carefully, Adom. Make sure they do not deviate from their salvation. Their lives depend on it. Treat them harshly, for they deserve it. They have brought this upon themselves, but do not show hatred for them. Reveal yourself to them as my messenger, make them know that you are their last hope for survival,” The High Queen said to me.

I bowed my head to her magnificent glory before turning and walking from the room. The ends of my slim marble legs softly clunked on the polished floor as I left her chambers to carry out her desires.

I no longer worry about being too tall, too ugly, or too thin. The High Queen gifted me perfection. For her generosity and mercy, I serve her with both heart and mind. Those are the only organs left, aside from a pair of lungs tucked neatly inside of my metal chest. The High Queen sent me on a journey of suffering to understand the cost of perfection. Over the course of a week, the doctors stripped away my ugly flesh piece by piece. They remade my body with marble and metal, making me into a statue of machinery just like the enforcer bots in our fair city. Stripped away was the concept of thin or fat, of tall or short, of ugly or not, I was reborn.

My torso was sculpted with a smooth curve that extended outward from the hip so that my chest could accommodate the size of my lungs. My arms extended outward enough for me to rest them comfortably at my knees when standing. To show power, my neck was extended, a pillar of metal and cloth above my chest to increase my height to 7’10.” The acne pocked ugliness of my old face was carved away so that a smooth, flawless mask of marble covered all but my eyes. The two burning, blue eyes seemed horrific within the sockets of white marble, the bare bloody flesh of my face rarely, but sometimes visible. The High Queen gifted me a new name, Adom the Seer.

The High Queen's tower sat centrally in the city, a massive megalithic monument to her divine mercy. She chose to remain in a shattered body, without all her limbs and most of her internal organs. Only her upper torso and head remained. She suspended herself at the top of the tower, in a web of black wires and mutilated human torsos. The remnants of her family spoke to her during her darkest days and offered wisdom to solve her troubles. Some called it madness, others argued it was a gift. No one questioned the High Queen, just as she intended. Humanity brought itself to ruin. Only by the inventions of genetic abominations did humanity survive. Only when humans gave up their freedom did they learn to thrive.

By the time I left the High Queen's tower, the sun began to set low on the horizon, bringing the world closer and closer to darkness. I visited the tower nightly to hear the wisdom of the High Queen's sermons in their entirety. Sometimes she spoke for only a brief period and sometimes she spoke until the dawn signaled the beginning of the next day. I didn't complain, I didn't speak, each moment with her was a gift.

Beside me strode Mr. Gray, a friend if I was being overzealous about our relationship. He and I spent long hours together listening to the High Queen, even if we rarely spoke to each other outside the tower. There existed an unspoken level of respect between him and I, a knowing co-existence that bordered on friendliness. He assured me that the perfect model citizen could be achieved by the way he went about his life so obediently. In return, I gave him the satisfaction of knowing his existence was something worth having, a perfect cog in the machine. Our paths soon split, his to headed back to the schoolhouse, and mine to do a sweep of the city. Officially, we'd talk later, as part of my investigation into a recent flare up of disobedience. We parted company as quiet companions, with little use for pleasantries to signal our departure.

My marble feet clicked on the smooth asphalt as I strode down the street. I walked along the chain link perimeter fence which hummed with lethal amounts of electricity. Only the most exceptional citizens are allowed access through the perimeter fence. On the other side of the fence, sentinels of marble and circuitry stand as ever present guardians and enforcers of the law. Unlike me, these sentinels lack any humanity, their minds are balls of circuits and machinery. They all possess the same voice, a female voice, filled with machine wisdom, as though they are daughters of the queen.

I soon arrived at the solid steel gate that separated the bounds between the queen's tower and the outside suburbs.

"The High Queen wishes you a delightful night, Adom," The sentinel at the gate said.

I didn't bother with a reply, I didn't need to. Sentinels weren't made to be conversationalists. They replied to citizens who interacted with them, but that was not their purpose. Their bodies were made of smooth marble, in the shape of a female, with long black hair made of rubber wires. Their eyes were simple ovals of soothing, blue light. They were built to seem as non-threatening as possible.

The sentinels were made to maintain order, but I was made to serve the High Queen to the best of my ability. When I was young, I was often called strange for my femininity, and by the time I was a teenager, I was labeled as "Queer" and shipped off to the pits. There, waiting in line for the end of my life, I found myself saved by my executioner. Through the eyes of the sentinels, the High Queen watched, and in a moment of generosity, she spared me from death. Instead of killing me that day, I was granted a new body, to rise above the masses and their inherent biases and reform myself. I became a seer, one with the ability to see people for who they truly are, without bias or hate, grudges or greed. To fully thank the High Queen, I took up

the new mantle as her chosen servant, to serve her as she wishes even if it means peacekeeping or leading the masses in defense of humanity. I kill, slay, and serve in her name just as the barbarians used to do in the name of their one true God.

I stepped through the gate as the heavy door slid open, striding out into the suburbs of the city. A roundabout surrounded the perimeter fence, and from it sprouted two dozen identical streets. All of the roads extended outward from this roundabout, and eventually ended at the great concrete wall that surrounded the city. Past the wall were remnants of the old humanity, failed cities, and countless dead along with the monsters that still called that place of anarchy home.

Down Quarry Street I went, my shadow accompanying me as I passed under the equally spaced streetlights. Partway down the street a child and his father approached me, out on their evening walk. The child was a boy, a young boy, no more than ten years old. He wore the same attire as every young boy wore, a t-shirt and shorts, both colored dull grey. The father wore what all male model citizens wore, a tucked button up white shirt with a grey suit jacket over his chest and matching pants. He also wore his model citizen mask, a wooden face mask with two eye holes and a wide smiling mouth. The boy paused and looked up at me as I paused and looked down at him. He didn't seem to know what to do as he turned back to his father and then looked back to me once more. After a moment or two, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small action figure resembling a sentinel. He held it high to show it to me and pressed the action button on its back, making it say in that monotonous female voice: "Have a delightful day."

I reached a hand down and rested it gently upon the boy's skull, patting his head once or twice before continuing on my way. The boy seemed pleased as I heard him talking excitedly to his father while they continued on their evening walk together.

I eventually came to a stop before a single story house that looked identical to the houses on either side of it. In fact, this house looked identical to all houses in the suburb, just as the queen willed it. Unity was a good thing after all. I approached the simple dark wooden door and reached a marble finger out to poke the doorbell; a soft “ding dong” echoed inside. Normally when sentinels made their daily home visits, they’d just barge in the front door. After all, it’s important to catch flawed citizens, to cut out tumors before they could infect the rest of the community.

The door opened to reveal Mr. Grey, again, my silent confidant.

“Delightful to see you Mr. Grey, may I come in?” I questioned.

He stepped aside to allow me entry into his tidy little home. I lowered my head and entered the doorway before I could stand fully upright again. Once inside, I surveyed his house, a comfortable living room in front of a cozy kitchen with a hallway leading down to a comfortable bedroom and bathroom.

“Delightful to see you too, Adom. Care to sit down?” Mr. Grey asked me in his usual kind natured way.

I enjoyed my visits to Mr. Grey, as much as one could enjoy anything. Inside of the tower, we were bound to our roles of servants while listening to the words of the Queen. Out here, things were relaxed, and allowed for some varying forms of interaction with Mr. Grey. The parts we played in our lives were monotonous, but there was some enjoyment to be found in each other’s company.

“No, thank you; I’m afraid I won’t be staying long. I’m here to check on your recovery after that unfortunate incident four days ago. I hope you are not suffering any ill effects from it,” I said.

I lowered my head, my elongated neck allowing me to put my face mere inches from his face without my body having to be right in front of him. My eyes stared through the holes in his mask into his eyes as I waited for a response, the desired response. Even if I did enjoy visiting Mr. Grey, there were still rules to be followed and order to be maintained. We both knew that.

“I’m delightful, thank you for asking,” Mr Grey responded, without so much as a twitch in his pupils.

I retracted my head and stood straight up once more as I put my fingers together and began to pace through his living room.

“Delightful. I just wanted to make sure. After all, I know that some of your friends were infected back then. It must have been hard for you to watch them struggle through such a traumatic disease. The High Queen almost ordered a full termination of this entire neighborhood. I assured her that wouldn’t be necessary, because of people like you, Mr. Grey. Delightful people who know better than to let that terrible disease take hold of them,” I explained.

I then paused and waited for his response. This was not a normal conversation. In order to save this neighborhood and Mr. Grey I risked the possibility of infection spreading throughout the city. I needed to be sure my risk wasn’t completely in vain. I needed to be sure that Mr. Grey wasn’t infected, for his sake, and for mine.

“What disease is that?” He asked, in a naive sort of way. He knew the risk of my gamble, and he knew that he needed to reassure me with proper model citizen answers.

“It goes by a few names: revolution, rioting, lawlessness, disobedience. Such a dreadfully contagious disease too, if one mind catches it, a whole block can be infected. Or, even worse, an entire city. Do you know why we’re still the last city to remain standing while all our sister cities have fallen?” I asked.

“No, why?” He asked.

So far he was playing nicely, not showing resistance or annoyance to the questions. Despite our back and forth, it was clear that we both desired a positive outcome from this test. Neither one of us wanted to hurt the other, yet the roles given to us needed to be upheld, even if it risked our friendship.

“We rid disobedience before it can start, which is why you, as a teacher, play such an important role in the development of our model citizens. After the recent outbreak the High Queen has deemed it necessary to begin the process of flaw labeling much earlier; the adolescent age. You will now be responsible for reporting any flaws you see in your students to the education sentinels. If you fail to report a flaw...” I paused.

Mid-pace I looked sidelong at Mr. Grey. He knew the threat of disobedience, as well as what measures were taken against those labeled as such.

“There won’t be a problem, Adom. I’ll report any flaws immediately as my citizen duties dictate,” Mr. Grey responded, reassuringly.

I continued to study him for a moment more before I decided that his answer was satisfactory enough.

“Delightful. Enjoy the rest of your evening, I will see you for the sermon tomorrow.” I said.

I promptly left the model home through the front door, letting it close behind me as I stepped back onto the street. It was time to visit a less than model citizen, someone who caught the disease of disobedience and failed to fight it off. Normally they would have been terminated, but their insights provide enough worth to retain them. At least, that’s what the Sisters of Judgment told me when we finally quarantined the outbreak. Most of the infected were treated, a

few were rehabilitated like Mr. Grey, and a handful were kept alive and studied to see why they became flawed.

Hidden behind the perimeter fence, behind the line of statue-like sentinels that stood guard, the dirty truth revealed itself. The pit, as the Sisters of Judgment call it, is the answer to many of the city's problematic questions. What happens if a model citizen grows too old to be useful? Where do citizens go when they're labeled as flawed? How does the city keep a perfect numerical ratio of people to match the set number of houses? It's a simple, but brutal answer. Those who are no longer useful to the city, who have become too old, mean, sick, or flawed, are labeled as such and brought to the pit to be terminated. It happens at night, when the model citizens are sleeping in their model homes.

As I reached the pit, the termination process proceeded on schedule, one by one the flawed citizens walked forward toward a large hole in the ground. The next flawed citizen in line stepped to the edge of the hole. The sentinel beside him extended a hand back before it swung the smooth marble limb forward in a swift smack. CRACK. The faint echo of the citizen's spine breaking as his neck snapped under the force of the sentinel's marble hand made me narrow my gaze. I silently watched as the limp body tumbled forward and fell into the pit, and the next flawed citizen in line steps forward. The cycle repeated itself. When a pit gets full, another is dug and so it went, on and on. I was not born a first generation child of the city, so I didn't know how many pits were dug, filled and dug again. Each pit could probably fit one hundred bodies. The population of the city is kept at five hundred, I have no idea how long the city stood before my birth. Long enough that I'm not confident enough to step foot on the soil of the field without certainty that I wouldn't hear a limb crunch beneath my foot. Sometimes the sentinels get sloppy

when they put dirt over the full pits. The field that these pits were dug in is so small that I dare not step off the paved sidewalk

A few children stood in line, their smiling wooden masks labeled with heavy big black words like, “BULLY,” “SICK,” or “BROKEN.” I continued onward to a building where the disobedient were kept for questioning. Two sentinels guarded the door. They seemed delighted to see me- they always did.

“Hello Adom! What brings you here on this delightful night?” the sentinel asked.

“I’m here to see a prisoner,” I replied.

The two sentinels remained stationary before me. I towered above them even though they were a good head or two taller than an average model citizen’s height. I felt a dizzying pressure build behind my eyes, I was supposed to be the exceptional voice of the High Queen- to be perfect. The questions returned to my mind, as they had four days ago during the outbreak. Were the pits truly necessary? I struggled through my perfection to remove my flaws yet why did model citizens need to be slaughtered to make the perfect city? Dozens died every night and still the city functioned. Humanity could not be made completely flawless, yet the High Queen still strove to remove all flaws from her citizens. Would the slaughter ever end? I served no one but the High Queen. I found myself questioning the wisdom gifted to her, whether it was truly proper guidance or the ravings of a monster. Blood seeped from the soil beneath my feet and I couldn’t help but think of how long it’d take before the entire city drowned.

“Authorization accepted. Have a delightful night, Adom,” the sentinels said in unison, stepping aside to let me pass.

The pulsing in my skull ceased, the blood disappeared from view, and the heretical thoughts faded from my mind. I lowered my head once more to enter and stood erect within the

entryway of the building. The walls, ceiling, and floor were spotless white marble and the bright lights served to blur my vision as I stepped in from near darkness. A sentinel stood behind a smooth marble desk opposite of the door, as if waiting to check me in for my appointment. I strode past the desk and the sentinel, walking through the door that sat beside the desk. The door leads to a long, dimly-lit hallway that stretches nearly the length of the building. Large one way glass windows on either wall revealed small cells-each cell a small box with barely enough room to walk without hitting a wall. There were no beds, no sinks, no toilets, just a little drain in a corner. I stopped at the cell she was contained in. I then waited for the heavy metal door to slide open once I typed in the correct code on the keypad beside the door.

“You’ve come to visit me again; how kind of you to show some human decency to me,” she said. The disobedient, the reckless, the arrogant, the rule breaker.

I stood outside the cell’s open door, not willing myself to step into the same room as her. The edges of my vision grew dark and my skull began to throb. Any closer and I’d surely succumb to disobedience. It radiated off her in waves unseen to the naked eye, only felt deep within the recesses of the mind where doubt resided.

“Mrs. Wilkins.”

“It’s just Miss Wilkins now. Don’t you remember? My husband was terminated,” she said, refusing to look at me.

“Your husband was infected, Miss Wilkins. All infected citizens were terminated with the exception of you, and a few others. Do you know why you weren’t terminated, Miss Wilkins?” I asked.

She didn’t respond, she just sat there, staring at the dull grey wall opposite of her.

“After the initial outbreak, those who were infected were brought before the Sisters of Judgment. They subjected the infected to their tests, bloody and gruesome tests.” I said, pausing.

My heart thudded in my marble chest and my fingers were clenched into fists. Did they really deserve such a fate? Why couldn't they have been swiftly killed like the others? What did the High Queen hope to accomplish by torturing them to death? Flaws could not be removed like fingers or teeth so why were the disobedient tortured in such a ghastly way? I loosened my fingers, inhaled and let my lungs refill. The questions subsided, my body relaxed.

“Their testimonies told us that you were one of the conspirators behind this outbreak. Miss Wilkins, you were patient zero,” I said.

Miss Wilkins still didn't respond. I grew restless with her unresponsiveness as I yearned to hear her reasoning. Why did she rebel when there was no hope of beating the sentinels or killing the High Queen? What did she hope to gain by creating widespread disobedience? Did she not realize that the High Queen did not care about body count? Even if a majority of the city was terminated, the High Queen wouldn't relent in her desperation for human perfection. Why did Miss Wilkins believe in such a fickle thing as hope? Could she not see that there was no such thing in this hell? She didn't address these concerns. Instead, she said, “I've enjoyed our talks, Adom. Give the Queen my regards,” a hint of amusement in her voice.

There came a faint rumble from beneath my feet and I watched as the floor dropped beneath Miss Wilkins' feet. I slammed my marble hand on the alert button at the bottom of the keypad. Normally a pair of sentinels were sent to chase, but if they got to her first she'd be terminated before I could get any answers from her. I stepped forward into the hole in the cell's floor and dropped fifteen feet before landing on the cold stone of the sewer. The ceilings were lowered, and I had to crane my neck forward so that I could walk through the dim tunnels.

I noticed a tank of pressurized oxygen with an acetylene torch beside it, used for cutting through the steel floor of the cell. The source of the rumble was still a mystery; most likely an explosion of some sort to break through the concrete. I didn't investigate for long as the distant sound of splashing feet caught my attention. I turned toward the origin of the sound and ran through the tunnel. My marble legs carried me gracefully as I ran, like a horse at full gallop. The dimness of the sewer didn't bother me since I was enhanced with vision based cybernetics.

I came to a stop at a four way junction in the tunnel. There wouldn't be anyone behind me, except the sentinels if they jumped into the hole afterwards. I could hear splashes in the tunnels to the left and right of me, meaning that Miss Wilkins, and whoever helped her escape, were now split up. My fists clenched in indecision. I didn't have a sure answer, nor did I have a reasonable guess. I reasoned if I caught one, the location of the others could be pried out by the Sisters of Judgment.

I went left, sprinting down the tunnel at ferocious speeds— a tiger chasing down a gazelle. My arms reached out into the darkness as I ran, fingers pushing through the air in front of me. I spotted the dull grey prison uniform and blob of blonde hair that belonged to Miss Wilkins ahead of me. A rush of insurmountable triumph filled my heart as I willed my body to run faster. I willed myself on, growing ever closer.

If Miss Wilkins looked back now, she would have seen my sheer white body and face emerge from the darkness. The black cloth around my neck and shoulders gave me an appearance of having a floating head and arms— an overall horrific sight.

The tips of my marble fingers felt the locks of her hair. I could almost feel the drumming beat of her heart as she ran. I was so close, just a little bit more and I'd catch her.

There came a beam of yellow light from further down the tunnel. I recognized the beam instantly— a mining laser used to dig through rock. My instant reaction was to raise my extended arm above Miss Wilkins' to protect my own head. This reaction saved my life as the beam annihilated my arm up to the elbow.

I saw Miss Wilkins turn a corner down a much narrower tunnel ahead of me, but I didn't pause. I didn't want to lose momentum. I ignored the fleeing Miss Wilkins to instead focus on the mining laser, which was charging up again. There wouldn't be time for another shot. I was almost upon the man wielding the laser, plus, the first shot drained much of the laser's battery.

Before the laser could recharge, I was upon the man wielding it. I used my good hand to throw the laser against the concrete wall. I used my destroyed arm as a blunt bat to smash the wooden mask of the man. The half melted elbow joint slammed into the mask and shattered it, causing tiny wooden splinters to explode outward. My other hand followed up and caught the man by the neck, grabbing his throat and crushing it. Blood and muscle splattered across the sewer walls, and my hand now dripped with blood. The red in my vision subsided as I stood over the lifeless corpse and realized what I had done. It had been so quick, so swift that I didn't think about my actions, they came naturally. Was this what the High Queen wanted from me? Was my body built to act not as a protector but a terminator? I could have taken him in, or sent him to the Sisters of Judgment.

The dense fog of doubt and guilt surrounded me as I stood over the corpse. The Queen had made me into her vision of perfection, but at what cost? The Queen decreed those who wanted to ruin her perfect city needed to be terminated. I looked down at the bloodied stub of my arm and my vision blurred. The Queen gifted me a perfect body and after years serving her I now knew why. The sentinels were machines, when the Queen gave them orders to kill, they'd do so

without hesitation. Me, I was human, I still had emotions and thoughts of my fellow humans. Even with this body I was still a man beneath the marble. If the Queen could turn me into a thoughtless killing machine, what was to stop her from doing the same to every model citizen?

“Oh darling, what happened? Did those nasty little bugs hurt you? Did they break your beautiful body? Don’t worry, we’ll fix you up good as new,” Sister Nurturing said.

“Once your arm is rebuilt, we’ll send sentinels to chop off the arms of every known flawed citizen in the city! Then we’ll chop off the arm of every child in the city so that the new generation knows how terrible their parents are,” Sister Offended said.

“We will give you a sword so you can smite those who try to harm you. The High Queen will surely hear of this, and when she does, she’ll order the sentinels to punish the disobedient that wronged you,” Sister Reasonable said.

“For now, Adom, rest. You’ll need it for the purge to come,” Sister Justified said.

Together all four Sisters of Judgment loomed over me as I lay on my back. A dozen robotic arms sprouted from the ceiling like a spider crawling down a web. I remained silent as the robotic arms went to work on my missing limb, first removing the melted elbow joint and replacing it with a new arm. The polished white marble of my new arm reflected the four limbless torsos of the Sisters of Judgment. They too were images of the Queen’s Perfect human, with all their imperfections sliced away, a mirror to what lay beneath my marble skin. Their heads held lush long black wires that sprouted from their skulls like hair and connected to terminals that relayed their thoughts with one another. Without the burden of legs, arms, or a collection of useless organs, the Sisters of Judgment claimed to be the perfect judges. The High Queen treated them as precious daughters and let them handle ruling over the city

In some twisted sense I recognized the Sisters of Judgment as family, and they recognized me as a younger brother. Three of the sisters were around before the High Queen gifted me a new body. The fourth sister, Justified, arrived after the High Queen chose an exceptional female model citizen to become the newest sister.

It took an hour for my new limb to be reattached and properly tested to make sure it moved as swiftly as the old one. It wouldn't do if the new limb did not recognize my thought commands, a problem in the early days with my new body. This time, however, the limb responded as if it was the flesh on my old body.

“Thank you, for your generosity, Sisters,” I said.

“What would we be if not kind to you, darling? If you need anything, we're here for you, all the time, any time,” Sister Nurturing said.

“Bring us the perpetrator who attacked you and we will show them a new meaning of pain and suffering” Sister Offended said.

“Keep your head on a swivel, Adom. We don't know where Miss Wilkins fled to or who she's working with. Keep yourself safe,” the Reasonable Sister said.

“We will bestow upon you a gift so that you may protect yourself and slay those who dare defy you,” the Justified Sister said.

A metal crate descended from the ceiling before me. I suppressed the fear within me, was this just another way for the Queen to turn me into her perfect little killing machine? If I were to refuse this gift from them, they would surely report it to the High Queen, and I didn't wish to incite her wrath.

The crate opened to reveal a shiny dark, navy blue greatsword. The blade stretched at least four feet in length and the tip rounded outward in a crescent moon shape. The tip could

easily slice through flesh while the blade held enough weight to slice a man in two with one swing.

“Thank you for the gift, Sisters. I will use it to the best of my ability,” I said.

I sheathed the new executioner sword on my back beneath the black cloth that hung from my shoulders and formed a sort of cape that went down to my hips. As night passed to dawn, the city awoke as it always did, with a delightful message from the High Queen, read by one of the sentinels on each television screen in the city.

“Good morning citizens, another delightful day in our fair city. But you know what isn’t delightful? Barbarity, Cruelty, Disobedience. Last night our heroic protector, Adom the Seer, was brutally attacked while trying to protect our fair city. He was attacked by Mrs. Wilkins, a flawed and monstrous citizen that might have hurt a model citizen if it hadn’t been for the heroics of Adom. That is why, today, every model citizen will show their gratitude for our heroic protector. Citizens who don’t show up to pay gratitude will be labeled flawed, rude, and selfish. Our city runs on rules, and by following those rules, model citizens like you will keep our community healthy and strong.”

Perhaps this was some test, I walked slowly through the crowd of model citizens. Maybe the High Queen is attempting to show me that killing the disobedient is necessary to protect the obedient. No, she wished me to show me off to them, to indoctrinate the minds of the obedient with my image as some heroic role model. If I killed in the Queen’s name, what was stopping others from doing the same? She wanted to make it obvious to everyone that I was the model for every citizen to look up to. Although the High Queen hadn’t sent for me; I knew this was her way of trying to ease any doubts I felt.

I still had parts of my humanity, despite what some people thought, and hearing thanks from hundreds of model citizens made me feel like I was actively indoctrinating them. Outwardly I played the part that the Queen wanted me to play, I shook hands with male model citizens. I allowed female model citizens to hug me with tears streaming from their masks. I accepted cards from little model citizen children with crude drawings of me fighting evil monstrous figures.

I hadn't been able to capture Miss Wilkins' and had lost an arm in the process. Whenever I looked down at my new arm, I felt a slight touch of fear creep into my heart, only now recognizing how close I was to death. Despite the gift of the executioner sword, the High Queen decided it best to keep a closer eye on me. Usually when I didn't meet her expectations, she barred me from her tower. Without the Queen's words, guilt and doubt festered within my mind as I was forced to think of what I had done wrong. After a few days, or even a week at times, she'd call for me and explain my mistake to label another flaw on my soul. I used to wander the city by myself, doing my tasks and ensuring a smooth and delightful society. Now, I was stuck with a permanent guard of four sentinels that refused to move ten feet away from me. I felt frustrated at the Queen's way of indirectly punishing me. She didn't outright label me as weak; instead she forced these sentinels to follow me. I lost part of my arm and now the Queen deemed it necessary for me to have protection. However, the sentinel detail wasn't the only problem the Queen stuck me with. I wanted to get after Wilkins as soon as my arm had been fixed, but now I could do little since I was surrounded by thankful citizens. I knew the Queen wouldn't let Wilkins get away, and she no doubt sent sentinels to track down Wilkins in my place. Did the Queen sense the growing doubt within me? Was this her way of making sure her perfect protector wasn't corrupted by other minds like Wilkins?

Among the crowd of mask wearing model citizens I spotted a man slowly making his way through it. In the hustle and bustle of the street I couldn't tell whether or not the man was going on his way to work or if he was doing devious deeds. He seemed strangely familiar, the peppered hair reminded me of Mr. Grey. I couldn't recollect shaking hands with Mr. Grey yet. I did speak with him the prior night in a way not befitting friends. Perhaps he was upset at me for questioning his loyalty after we'd spent so much time together. Still, I had lost an arm, the least he could do was shake my hand. I didn't expect him to weep and cry for my loss, but a simple handshake would surely suffice.

I altered my path, walking through the crowd as the sentinels seamlessly course corrected to stay in formation around me. The crowd didn't seem too abashed by this sudden movement as they continued to pour their gratitude upon me. I ignored their cries of joy and their thanks. I focused entirely on the fleeing form of Mr. Grey.

He blended in and out of the crowd, making it hard for me to keep track of him. With so many people swarming me, it was hard to move without potentially crushing some hysterical citizen who desired to drop to their knees and thank me. My anxiety grew as I realized he was slipping away, as if intentionally trying to avoid me.

"Get after him, but don't hurt him," I ordered.

This was the first time in a long time I had to rely on the sentinels to do my duty for me. As if my body couldn't compete with the mere mechanical robotics of the sentinels.

"As you wish, Adom," the sentinels said.

Two sentinels remained behind me, flanking either side. In a contest of who would budge first, man or machine, machine clearly won as the sentinels easily moved forth.

The other two sentinels were lions as they moved through the crowd before pouncing on their prey, grabbing Mr. Grey's shoulders and forcing him to the ground.

There came a cry from one of the citizens in the back who had witnessed the take down. I didn't know whether or not this cry signaled disobedience or some violent action taken against the sentinels. I instinctually raised a hand up and over my shoulder and reached for the hilt of the executioner sword. When I realized this, I immediately returned my hand to my side and rushed through the crowd to see what had happened.

"FLAWED! He's flawed! Flawed! Flawed," came the cry from the back.

The cry was taken up by a bigger and bigger portion of the crowd as they stopped and pointed at Mr. Grey, screaming the same word over and over again. The cry coincided with the majority of the crowd taking a good three steps back from Mr. Grey. It was as though they feared contamination by proxy.

I made my way through the crowd with the other two sentinels to find Mr. Grey on the ground with a sentinel pressing a robotic knee into his back. The other sentinel held the collars of two children in its grasp, both wore masks that read, "DEFIANT" across their foreheads.

I heard the sirens before I saw the crowd parting to let the large truck through. The truck was painted pure white aside from big block letters that read "FLAWED" on either side of it. It was a prison van, with a driver's cab and a large confined box where flawed citizens were kept. The sentinels put Mr. Grey and the two children into the back of the truck and slammed the doors shut before returning to their earlier positions. I wondered whether this was really necessary. Mr. Grey wasn't a threat to anyone. Maybe this was just a mistake; maybe he was on his way to report these two youths. I wanted to ask him, to let him speak and explain his side of what was going on, but the sentinels threw him in the back of the truck before I got a chance.

Strangely, Mr. Grey didn't even try to make eye contact with me, nor did he shout for my help. What had happened to him since I last saw him? Why did he let the sentinels arrest him without saying a word?

I decided to leave a sentinel to handle the crowd and follow the truck to the Queen's tower. By the time I arrived at the chamber of Judgment, the Sisters had begun their interrogation. Mr. Grey no longer wore his mask. He stared down at the floor as a bundle of thick black wires wrapped tightly around his wrists, holding him upright.

"This is unacceptable! This is completely ridiculous for a model citizen, a teacher at that, to harbor two disobedient children in a public rally! He should be terminated at once!" Sister Offended said.

"Now, Sister, we have hardly heard his side of the story. Perhaps he was just transporting the flawed children to a nearby camp," Sister Reasonable said.

"That would have been the case if not for the fact that between his arrest point and his home there were at least four reporting camps. He traveled far from his home, closer to the sewage treatment plant. He deliberately tried to sneak these children out of the city, why?" Sister Justified questioned.

"Perhaps they are his kids, perhaps he doesn't want his kids to be taken away from him? That's a pretty noble deed if I do say so," Sister Nurturing said.

"Mr. Grey has no children at the moment. He was recently rehabilitated by us under the direction of Adom. Has he slipped from his path of rehabilitation and carried the disease of disobedience this entire time?" Sister Reasonable said.

“There’s only one way to find out, cut him open and see what he says when we rehabilitate him again! This time we’ll make sure to cut out all the diseased parts of his body,” Sister Offended said.

From the ceiling the robotic arms extended outward with various tools of torment. If I stepped in now on his behalf, I would surely feel the wrath of the Queen. I disobeyed her once by arguing to keep him alive, and now that he was here, it meant my argument had been flawed all along. Why did I have such feelings for a man who had done nothing but listen and talk with me? Perhaps because I spent countless hours making his rehabilitation work out. No, that couldn’t have been it. Could it be that his humanity offered something that the High Queen and the Sisters could not? The High Queen gifted me a body, saved me from death and gave me a position of power in the city. Could it be that Mr. Grey cared for me more than the Queen? That couldn’t possibly be the truth. The Queen rebuilt me, she spared me and me alone from the pits, certainly she cared enough to continually nurture me. Doubt manifested in my mind like a tumor, and I felt my body tense with the realization. To the Queen, I was no more than a pawn, a useful experiment for her legacy. All she cared about was whether or not she could recreate me in others. I left my humanity to be a protector, to guard humanity against itself and the flaws that led it to self-destruction! From the first day I believed in my purpose, believed in my duty as guardian of humanity. Only now did I realize I bought into the Queen’s lie, I was not a protector, I was a prototype for the Queen’s plan for the humans in the city.

“Let’s banish him outside the walls where he will be forced to live in isolation for the remainder of his days and think about his mistake,” I suggested.

I did not know what came over me to suggest this action, why it suddenly erupted from me like a geyser.

“Yes! Brilliant! We’ll banish him outside the wall where he can suffer with the rest of those monsters. The other disobedient citizens will get their act in line when they see his fate,” Sister Offended said.

“He will see the errors of his ways when he experiences the ruins of humanity. He’ll have to carry this sin for the rest of his days,” Sister Reasonable said.

“Then it’s settled. You’ll be banished at once, Mr. Grey, for your crimes of disobedience,” Sister Justified said.

Two sentinels moved forward and grabbed Mr. Grey, and he was marched from the room. He stopped walking when he was about to pass me. He stuck out his cuffed hands, raising one as if he wanted me to shake it. I tried to hold back the growing pressure behind my eyes even as tears began sliding down my cheek beneath the mask. I reached a marble hand out to shake his. We didn’t speak, there were no words to say, no words to reassure him, nor I. I could almost see gratitude on his face.

“Such compassion. Oh darling, you really mustn’t worry yourself with those broken things. They’re infected and need to be removed in order to keep our society delightful,” Sister Nurturing said.

I left the chamber before the two children could proceed, something inside of me wondered if I felt guilty. I had little choice in the matter. The Queen wouldn’t allow Mr. Grey to live within the walls of the city. Would it have been a mercy to kill him? What sort of horrors would he find outside the walls? What sort of mercy is death if the Queen claimed the city to be perfect? Was I already the cold machine the Queen wanted me to be? If I considered death as the best possible mercy, I was no better than the sentinels at the pit. I reassured myself that I was not

a lifeless machine like the sentinels. Doubt still filled my mind and wrapped around me like the chains of a prisoner. Prisoner or protector, that was the real question.

“The High Queen sends you a message, Adom. She wishes for you to oversee the pit tonight. Miss Wilkins you will be there and you will terminate her,” said one of the sentinels escorting me.

I knew this was her effort to seal the deal, to show me that I could be just as cold and lifeless as the sentinels were. My thoughts returned to Mr. Grey. I knew his survival odds were low, perhaps he’d last a few days, or a few months. Maybe he’d even find a new life for himself and live in the anarchy of the old world. I could no longer protect him now that he was outside the walls, nor could I do anything to help him. I remembered the look on his face, gratitude mixed with relief. Was he relieved to not die or was he happy to no longer be oppressed by the Queen and her rules? For a brief moment, I considered him lucky.

By the time night fell, dark storm clouds lingered overhead and a constant shower of rain fell upon the city. I slowly strode down the line of flawed citizens, their heads bowed as they marched toward the pit. The two children from earlier were in line. I could tell by the “DEFIANT” label written across their masks. I did not pause to console them; I did not ask them if they’d be rehabilitated; I didn’t even pay them enough attention to look at them for more than a brief glimpse. They were flawed and flawed citizens had no place in the Queen’s city.

I saw Miss Wilkins in line alongside a motley crew of other disobedient citizens. I could see various scars scattered across their bodies, from the Sisters of Judgment enacting justice upon them. Miss Wilkins didn’t acknowledge my presence. The fight had been taken out of her along with an organ or two. When I saw her, I could only think of Mr. Grey and the effort he

made to save the children that didn't deserve a one way ticket to the pit. I resolved to push these thoughts from my mind, yet they returned with greater force each time I did so.

I turned my back on Miss Wilkins and made my way to the front of the line, standing by the edge of the pit as I looked down at the mangled corpses. This pit was almost halfway full, though that didn't stop the sentinels from doing their jobs. One by one the problematic people of this perfect society were thrown into the pit. I watched with some amount of dread as Miss Wilkins grew closer to the pit's edge. I decided to use the executioner sword on her, to slice her down the middle, perhaps that would clear these doubts from my mind.

As Miss Wilkins drew closer to the pit, I gripped the hilt as I tried to convince myself this was justice. It was her fault Mr. Grey turned out to be disobedient. It wasn't completely his fault, he only caught the disease. Miss Wilkins had spread it. If she hadn't been so unlawful, Mr. Grey would still be here, in the city, with me. I couldn't decide whether or not that was a better or worse fate than that of his current one.

The blade made a soft hissing sound as I pulled it off my back and held it aloft with one hand. I was certainly ready for this moment; she'd pay for her sickness, for her dangerous disobedience, here and now.

Before Miss Wilkins could step to the edge of the pit, she bolted out of line in an attempt to flee her coming execution. Two of the escort sentinels were about to make chase when the flawed citizen who was in line behind Miss Wilkins, ran after her as well. I did not expect the flawed citizen to suddenly leap forward and tackle Miss Wilkins to the ground.

The sight surprised me and I remained motionless as half-a-dozen sentinels swarmed the scene, containing the two. I ignored Miss Wilkins' shouts about the damnation of humanity under a mechanical thumb and instead approached the other citizen. Across the top of the mask

the word “OLD” was written in big block letters. I couldn’t tell his exact age, but his hair was a faded grey. Before I spoke to him, he grabbed my empty hand and shook it slowly.

“I forgot about coming to thank you earlier today and I just want to say thank you. Because of you, my daughter will grow up to be old like me in this city of ours,” The old man said.

I returned the old man’s hand shake. He removed the mask to smile up at me with youthful sparkling eyes.

“If it wouldn’t be too much to ask, sir, would you do the honors of sending me out? It would make me joyful to be sent out by the hero of our city,” The old man requested.

I didn’t speak because I didn’t know what to say. Instead, I walked with him back to the edge of the pit where Miss Wilkins was, being restrained by two sentinels. I held my sword horizontally, leveling the blade with Miss Wilkins’ neck.

“Are you proud of this? Are you happy to kill an innocent woman just because she disagrees with your Queen? You and all the other pig headed people in power are the reason humanity collapsed!” Miss Wilkins shouted.

With a swift stroke of the blade, Miss Wilkins’ head left her body and fell into the pit to join the other flawed corpses.

I turned to the old man, he seemed so happy, so peaceful. For a moment I saw an older version of Mr. Grey. The thought made it so I couldn’t move for a moment or two. It didn’t feel right; it didn’t feel justified to kill this old man just because he was too old to be useful to the city anymore. A dull aching throb blurred my vision. Most of the people in the pit didn’t deserve to be killed, just because they weren’t perfect didn’t mean they needed to die. The sick, the weary, the elderly, in the Queen’s city only those who weren’t flawed were allowed to live. I

found it ironic that with all her wisdom, the Queen didn't realize that no human was without flaw.

I leveled the blade with his neck, then swiped it forward. The blade didn't meet any resistance as it cleanly separated head from body, followed by a wet thud from the pit. I briefly shook the sword of blood before sheathing it on my back.

The Queen's orders were fulfilled and my duty was done for the time being. I decided to rest my mind for another day to come. When the sun rose the next morning, the High Queen desired to speak to me, and so I entered her chambers and knelt before her in solemn silence.

"I have heard of your great mercy and great strength over the past few days, Adom. Your service to me and the city has been thoroughly noted. Yet do not fill your mind with prideful thoughts of triumph, for humans are fickle creatures who can revolt at the slightest sign of tyranny. For now, we will continue to groom them, to feed them satisfaction and to make them happy in their slavery. Only when humanity is fully enslaved can we be sure that they will survive without their desperate drive for self harm. Adom, you will be my sword, cutting out the sick organs of humanity. They will resent you, they will fear you, but they will love you because they know you are saving them. Perhaps, in a thousand years, when my brain no longer functions, you will take my place and rule over a delightful city." She said.

"It will be done, my Queen," I said.

I left the Queen's chambers with her blessing and promise of a bright future. Mentally, I questioned whether that promise could hold true over the test of time. For countless years I struggled to stamp out disobedience within the city. Now I find myself trying to push out disobedience within myself. Could I really last another century of solitude and false smiles? There were no certainties of truth, friendship or loyalty within the city, only promises made by

the Queen. People like Mr. Gray came and went within the city, they struggled with morality while I am supposed to be above it all. The Queen's love is eternal, but so is her control.

I left the tower and kept walking, across the pits full of bodies, and past the gate where the sentinels stood stoic. Countless smiling masks looked up to me as I walked through the streets, they bowed their heads and wished me a delightful day. What lay beneath their masks, I wondered, was it truly delight? I no longer had the energy to lie to myself, as much as those wooden masks wanted me to believe otherwise. I realized that the dream of a truly delightful city was nothing more than a nightmare of deception, destruction and death. So, I kept walking.

When I arrived at the sewage treatment plant, I unclipped the executioner sword from my back. I left the heavy metal blade there, shedding my role as guardian, or rather, executioner. I threw off the grate of the sewer drainage pipe leading outside and hopped down into the murky sludge. I felt too weary to stomach any more lies of the Queen, to suffer any longer as her experiment and toy. As the sun of the outside world judged me in radiance, I suppressed any remorse for leaving. The Queen would make another Adom, just as she did with me. I left the city then, as empty as my marble body, and nameless as my blank marble mask. I didn't look back either, instead, I kept walking, even if my joints rusted and limbs cracked, I'd keep walking. There was no place far enough to escape from the living nightmare of the last city, or the guilt that scarred me.

100 Below

Dark ashen snow drifted past the hooded form of Delilah, as she clung to the ragged leather coat while she walked along the wooden boardwalk. On either side of the rotted wood planks, piles of the sludgy grey snow clumped together in mounds that reached shoulder height. Copper pipes sizzled around her feet, melting any flake of snow that drifted onto the bustling thoroughfare.

Heavy boots clomped and thudded, vibrating the planks beneath the feet of dozens walking through. Delilah kept her hood pulled down as far as it could reach, hiding the slight darkness of her skin. She looked like a mouse amongst the tall, brutish workers that moved past her otherwise slender and petite form. Unlike all of the workers and citizens that passed her by, her body remained unblemished by the bulbous sacks of puss and putrid flesh that marked the men and women of the Last City. She didn't believe in the new god and his promises of strength through infection, even if she suffered harshly from the bone numbing cold. The punishment for not accepting the Plague Father's blessing included execution, banishment, or worse. Delilah kept on the move daily to avoid the random searches done by the convent.

She moved off third street and headed toward the outskirts, where the ice wall rose hundreds of feet into the sky. The city sat nestled in a crater, initially drilled and dug out during the first winters, back when the snow melted away for a few months. Now the snow remained year round, and constant frigid gales assaulted anything on ground level. Though some of the wind still dove into the crater, the sheer drop off prevented much from reaching the city streets.

Away from the massive fire that burned fiercely within the central tower, the temperature steadily decreased, as frigid air constantly nipped at Delilah's fingers and jaw. Out here, only the warehouse workers dared to trek away from the warmth of the tower's fire, and they were few

and far between. Still, Delilah remained cautious and vigilant, her head bowed low to prevent anyone catching a look at her pure skin. Ahead of her, the steel walled warehouses loomed silently, and Delilah soon spotted a small red mark on a corner wall. She followed the wall of this particular warehouse, her boots crunching in the grey snow beneath her feet. When she arrived at the small side door to the warehouse, she found it unlocked and slipped quickly into the darkness within.

Inside the warehouse, the smell of sawdust and recently cut lumber struck Delilah as she slid her way past the towers of stacked planks. Barely any light managed to seep in between the cracks of lumber piles, and the path between the stacks twisted to and fro like the walls of a maze. Eventually, she turned a corner to find the warmth and comfort of light, generated by a campfire set in the middle of an open space near the back of the warehouse. Here, a few dozen refugees and runaways made their makeshift camps, huddled around the fire to keep warm from the bitter cold. This was only a fraction of those who were on the run from the church, either already labeled as heretics or unable to return to their original homes due to the inquisition. Such a large mass of people around the warehouse district would surely arouse suspicion, so only a small number of runaways were allowed back at camp for a few hours out of the day. The rest of the time, they worked the odd job, or kept to the outskirts, a constant struggle against the bone numbing cold, and to stay out of the eyes of the inquisition. In her temporary sanctuary, Delilah found rest and respite from the unending cold and the constant threat of the inquisition. For just a few hours Delilah ignored the paranoia and anxiety that gnawed at her every time she walked through the city. She found a nook amongst the timber and sat with her soup, gulping down the broth and chewing the meager piece of meat that came with it. Her belly grumbled with need for

more, but for the time she ignored it and decided to catch some shuteye. This wasn't the first time she'd fallen asleep hungry, nor did she doubt that it would be the last.

The low piercing wail of the end of shift whistle awoke Delilah from her slumber, making her curse beneath her breath at how long she had slept. She slid out from her nook between the planks and out the side door, back into the frozen tundra. The sky was an orange haze from the setting sun though Delilah couldn't see the sun as it was already beneath the ridge on the far side of the city. She could already see that the streets were packed with workers as they traveled back to their homes for their evening meal. This left Delilah less than an hour to make her way to the other side of the city, where the coal mines were located. Unlike most of the workforce, the coal miners worked sixteen hour shifts, gathering enough coal so the furnace in the central tower doesn't burn out overnight. As such, they were exempt from the seven o'clock church services every other citizen was mandated to attend. Anyone seen outside of the church at this time was arrested on sight.

Though Delilah wasn't a coal miner, there were always openings in the transport hubs that littered themselves around the mines. The job consisted simply of moving coal from the mines to the rail tracks, where large steam powered minecarts hauled coal to the central furnace. Normally Delilah set off for the coal mines at least an hour and a half early, allowing her time to skirt along the trails carved through the snow on the outer edges of the city. However, with less than an hour to get to the mines before mandatory prayers, she'd need to go through the center of the city, where the crowd was the densest and the presence of the church was highest. By the time she reached 3rd street, the crowd pressed in around her, a dense mingling of leather coats and putrid smell. Warty, boil covered, and red rashed, the citizens around her seemed completely

content with their grotesque flesh and ungodly smells. She tried not to gag or show visible signs of unease, pulling her hood further over her face as she followed the mass of feet tromping on around her. Throughout the inner city, as well as in the more densely worked areas, shrines to the Plague Father were erected as a constant reminder of the city's savior. Atop of these shrines, loudspeakers were placed, repeating sermons and messages from the church to boost citizen morale.

“Remember, the Plague Father gifted us his strength. We are all his children, and he adores us all. Never forget that he is within all of us, lending us his strength so we may survive another day. We are his children, and he is our father, so let us rejoice at his kindness and be thankful for his charity,” the loudspeakers spouted.

Delilah tried her best to tune out the mind numbing repetition, focusing entirely on the man's feet in front of her, matching his steps as she moved closer and closer to the city center. When she reached 1st street, the heat from the furnace was enough that even in short sleeves she would have been hot. Sweat began pooling at her brow as her eyes traveled up the back of the man before her, then gazed past him at the great metal tower that housed the central furnace. Titanic pistons thudded and thumped along the outer edges of the tower, as giant metal arms reached out and then slid back inward with each piston cycle. Like a massive spider, the piston's arms moved, working on its infinite web that distributed heat across the city. From the top of the tower, a plume of thick ash drifted upward, only to be caught by the ground level winds and blasted away.

As her eyes traveled along the tower, she failed to notice the raised platform that sat before the tower itself. Made of wood, and constructed to be at least two stories above the ground, this platform had dual purposes. The most obvious was for the overseer or church to

deliver messages to large crowds of citizens, much like a stage. The second purpose, however, was less noticeable, but the keen eye observer could spot the beams that stuck up from the platform with ropes tied around their ends. At the moment, the ropes were looped around the horizontal beam, to keep their ends hidden from view. Instead, banners of the Plague Father's symbol fluttered from the end of the horizontal beams, masking their true purpose.

Though Delilah didn't notice the platform at first, she did pay more attention to it as she spotted a figure standing upon it, surrounded by the tall robed monks that formed his personal protectors. The figure in question was a stout, short, and frail old man, hunched at the neck so he seemed even shorter. From the neck down, his body was covered in maroon red robes that did little to trim away his bulky form. His head contained no hair, and deep sets of wrinkles covered his face, especially around the beady little eyes that poked out through the flaps of skin. He tried to offset his height by wearing a tall stovepipe style hat with a dull golden tint to it, Delilah guessed it was to make himself look even more regal.

Known as Father Gungi, he led the church after the previous bishop was banished for heretical claims laid against him by an anonymous inside source. Many false believers had been banished that day, allowing for the overseer to stock the gaps with men who agreed with the new order of things, like Gungi. In his time since the change, Gungi had cracked down on the city, converting nearly all of its populace to be worshipers of the Plague Father. Though he and his clergymen were allegedly men of faith, their methods didn't follow suit. The brothers of the church acted as brutes, beating anyone that strayed out of line, while those who didn't conform were either sent away, killed, or sent to the office of the inquisition. Unlike monks of the church, the order of the inquisition maintained secrecy and mystery, with most of their secrets locked in the prison-like building they worked from. The one thing they did broadcast openly were

rewards for citizens who helped turn in the unbelievers, such as extra food rations or a home closer to the central tower. Those who were taken into the inquisition offices rarely came out, and when they did, they were made into monks or sent to hard labor in the mines.

Regardless, Delilah felt a growing sense of unease as she spotted Father Gungi, it was rare for him to be seen outside of the cathedral, much less in the center of town. Though the crowd around her was thick enough to make her view of him limited, she could feel his gaze upon her. As she walked through the crowd, she couldn't help but stare up at him as she tried not to look too out of place. A flickering thought of curiosity made her wonder what he was up to, why he stood there, staring at the mass of people before him, like a statue.

She went past the residential district, past the hissing copper pipes that pumped warmth directly into houses, and past the elitist eyes that looked down to the crowd with disgust and distaste. Instead, she made her way to the mining district, where the great arms of conveyors reached into the sky and the ground was stained pure black from coal dust. A constant symphony of squeaks and creaks filled the air as heavy metal buckets loaded with coal were pulled from the depths to be dumped into great mounds of blackness. The massive wheels of the excavators continued to spin as the buckets were emptied and then sent back down into the mines. Delilah pulled up the scarf wrapped tightly around her neck to act as a mask against the fine particles of coal dust in the air. Around her, children as young as eight carried sacks full of coal to the central rail track where the massive steam powered train waited. The decree of child labor happened early on in the overseer's regime, and though children were limited to 'safe' jobs, the sight of the kids covered in black dust made Delilah dispirited.

When she approached the main building of the cluster of smaller gathering huts, an extremely overweight man met her at the door. He wore ragged leather clothing and his neck had a massive sac of yellowish pus that wobbled when he spoke.

“Whaddya want?” He asked, sitting behind a counter with wooden bars segregating him from the entryway that Delilah stood in.

“I’m here to work,” Delilah replied.

The man grunted as he looked over her, his gaze unable to pierce the multiple layers of clothing she wore over her body.

“Hut six is understaffed; you’ll be gathering from rig three, the one directly east of here, you know where that is right? Good, you’ll only get a meal ticket for every continuous six hour shift, nothing less, nothing more, do you have a workman’s card?” He asked.

Delilah pulled out the small, dense piece of stock paper from her coat pocket and held it up. The man nodded his head in approval.

“Punch in when you get to hut six, punch out when you’re done,” he said.

With that, he flipped open a large leatherbound book that sat on the counter, marking down something within the book before he waved a hand at Delilah to send her on her way. She didn’t need to be told twice, and scurried back out into the frigid air. Without the heat from the sun, temperatures dropped drastically outside, and Delilah slid her hands into her coat pocket as she jogged through the rows of gathering huts. The walls were lined with simple lockers to store personal belongings, with a punch card machine next to the door. Delilah punched in her timecard before she went back out into the cold, jogging toward rig six to keep some warmth.

The process of hauling coal from the coal rigs to the tram line was something of a simple, brain numbing task. For Delilah, she was given a wooden box, to which she’d fill to the brim

with coal chunks. She'd then heft the box across thin pathways that had been trampled out through the snow and to the tram line. Once there, she'd dump the box's contents into one of the massive, pool sized, coal buckets and then go back for more. She often wondered whether the numbness of boredom would beat out the numbness of the cold. The work didn't require any sort of background requirement, and she didn't risk the dangers of being down in the mines. Since the task was so grueling and simplistic, only a few of the workers were adults while most of the gatherers were children. Adult workers could be employed in more useful operations, like in the ice drilling lumber mills or in the greenhouses, where things were more complex and dangerous. Out here, the only thing that was a threat was the frigid temperatures, and excessive boredom. Nearly everyone in the city had to deal with the cold anyways, so why not put the children to work to fill these menial jobs and spare the adult workers for the more important tasks.

By the time the ten o'clock shift whistle wailed, signaling an end to the sixteen hour shifts, Delilah could barely feel her fingers or feet. Her gloves, boots, and most of the front of her jacket and pants were all stained dark black with coal dust. Her back and arms ached from the heavy weight of the full box, and she felt ready to slump forward and face plant into the snow. Instead, she wearily trudged to hut six, where she punched out and then wandered back to the main building for two meal tickets. A line had formed of the other workers and she kept her head down as she dutifully waited her turn. When she reached the entryway of the building, the soft wave of heat made her eyes flutter and she was partly tempted to take off her gloves to let the heat warm her fingers. She kept them on, however, knowing that if she did reveal her clear skin, she'd be reported on the spot. There were far too many hungry mouths in this line, and with the inquisition promising warm, hot, meals to anyone who filed successful reports, Delilah knew the risk far outweighed any benefits.

She passed by houses that were mostly owned by the engineers, scientists and administrators of the city, usually housing no more than half a dozen residents. Further west, the luxuries diminished rapidly as did space per person as the worker's ward houses were interconnected compounds housing up to a few dozen people. Most people were happy to have solid walls and a roof over their head, not to mention continuous heating from the central furnace.

As she made her way to the cookhouse, she noticed a growing crowd of people out on the streets. All of them appeared to be headed toward town center, and she wondered why so many people would be out so late. Against her better judgment, she decided to follow one of the groups to the city center, her mind returning to what she had seen earlier that day. Perhaps Father Gungi had been planning something after all, but what it could be, she had no idea.

She confirmed her hunch that the malevolent preacher was up to something when she reached the city center and saw his hunched figure atop the wooden stage from earlier. A massive crowd of people stood before the stage, listening intently as Father Gungi spoke in a soft, yet powerful tone.

“That is why we always must remember to thank our divine protector, the Plague Father, for his generous gifts to us, that have allowed us to survive for this long. Without his touch upon our bodies, we would have surely succumbed to the cold, as well as the sins of our forefathers! Under his guidance we have built a sprawling utopia, even as the rest of the world around us freezes,” he said with a pause.

The crowd cheered and shouted their praise for the Plague Father, and when Father Gungi held up one of his hands, the crowd quieted to intently listen.

“Yet there are traitors amongst us! Heretics that do not believe our salvation is a reward but instead a curse! They believe that the Plague Father devilishly deceived and demented us, despite his warming love and affection for us. They believe we are fools to worship him, and fools further to accept his kindness upon our bodies, that we are mere slaves to him. Our forefathers were the true slaves! They were enslaved to a society that failed all of us, that failed the entire world, and we still pay for their failure today. I remember when there were trees that had leaves, and grass beneath the snow, and the warmth of a sun so hot, that we welcomed the snow to cool off. Now, we only see snow, there is only ice and darkness around us, and temperatures so cold that we had to amputate hundreds of limbs daily,” he paused once more.

The crowd nodded and mumbled their agreement, there were many who remembered the old days, before the arrival of the Plague Father and his gifts. Those days were filled with desperation to stay warm, to survive another day, to keep one’s hands and feet.

“My brothers, my sisters, we would have died a horrible death without the intervention and rescue of our benevolent Plague Father. He spared us from succumbing to the cold, from falling into despair and destruction out of the goodness of his heart. Yet what do these heretics repay him with? Nothing! He saved us all and yet they call him a false God, and a curse upon us! Surely these heretics do not deserve his love, they do not deserve his salvation, nor do they deserve life! So join me, children of the Plague Father, and let us show our undying gratitude by sacrificing those who do not wish to accept his kindness! Let us repay their hostility with the greatest punishment of all, death!” His voice boomed across the crowd.

A thunderous wave of approval and cheers instantly responded to Father Gungi as the preacher gave a slight nod to one of his assistants near the side of the stage. When the prisoners were pulled onto stage, the crowd reacted with boos and curses. The venom of the crowd spewed

forth onto the sunken figures that were chained together at the neck. Near the back of the crowd, Delilah couldn't identify the prisoners until the first batch were shoved forward to stand beneath the line of nooses. When the figures' hoods and hats were drawn back or thrown away, Delilah recognized them as familiar. They were from the warehouse, every one of them, even some that she hadn't seen around normally. A wave of anxiety rolled into her stomach, yet she remained steadfast, knowing she'd be spotted by the monks patrolling through the crowd if she ran.

The people cheered and clapped when the first group of prisoners dropped beneath the wooden platform. Delilah's mind raced as she wondered how such a thing was possible, how the church knew of the hideout when it was a closely guarded secret. She knew nobody would snitch, since they'd still be labeled as a heretic and punished by the inquisition. The outcasts were also careful to not have too many people at the camp at one time, in case of random church searches. So how did Father Gungi suddenly find out not only about the hideout but also nearly everyone that regularly visited?

Before Delilah knew it, a firm hand grabbed her by the wrist, when she turned to look at her assailant, her heart dropped as she saw the dull green robes of a monk.

"What's this now? Did we miss a heretic in our search? Lucky us that you came by to see your friends off then. Pull down your hood and lemme see your face," he commanded.

His breath reeked of vile pestilence and rot, and his eyes were mustard yellow as they stared out from beneath his hood. Delilah knew that she didn't have much time before more monks arrived, and also knew she'd have to act fast to get away. Luckily, she hadn't cleaned off any of the coal dust from earlier, staining her coat in blackened patches.

"Okay, I'll pull my hood down. Please don't hurt me," Delilah squeaked.

She hoped her plea would lower his guard, and the smirk on his face combined with the slight loosening of his grip told her that he must have bought it. With her free hand, she slowly reached up to her hood. She then grabbed her coat by the collar and flung it onto and over his head. She sent a swift and sudden knee to his stomach and pulled herself free. Now, without her coat, the crowd around her was able to see the uninfected and healthy skin on her neck and face. She didn't wait for a reaction as she swiftly lit a match, threw it at the monk and sprinted down the street.

The man beneath went up in flames. The crowd backed away as the man screamed and clawed at his head to try and dislodge the burning jacket. However, it was far too late for him, and as Delilah ran, his dying screams diminished behind her. She didn't know where she was going, only that she needed to run. With the warehouse no longer a safe option she didn't have any sort of backup plan. The frozen air gnawed at bare hands as she ran, her braid of hair bouncing on her back behind her. She could faintly hear the sounds of boots thudding behind her, no doubt as a group of monks chased after her. Around her loomed wooden towers of the engineering and scientific laboratories, a place foreign to her.

She cursed herself for her own foolishness, no longer able to think clearly as she realized how pointless her situation was. She'd surely be seen and reported if she did somehow manage to get away, and even if she wasn't reported instantly, she'd most likely die from frostbite in the long run. She wondered whether or not she should just stop and let them catch her, make her end a quick one instead of a long drawn out struggle that ended in death anyway. Before she could do that, she ran into something, or rather someone. She crashed into him and yet he remained upright, stalwart against the sudden impact as he looked down at her. The sounds of voices grew

louder as the monks chasing her drew closer, however, instead of restraining her or shouting for help, the man grabbed her by the shoulder and heaved her to her feet.

“Inside, quickly,” the man said.

He more or less pushed her through the door of the laboratory building that he had just walked out from, and once she was inside, he shut the door behind her. She sat against the door, holding her breath as she listened to the muffled thudding of boots outside.

“Oi! You there! You seen a girl run by here?” A voice shouted.

“I did; she went that way,” the man replied, casually.

The monks didn’t even offer a proper thanks before they resumed their chase, the sound of their footfalls slowly quieting. Delilah’s heart thudded loudly in her chest even as she sucked in a breath of air, unsure of what just happened or where she found herself. The door behind her squeaked open as the man returned, and Delilah decided to get a better look at her savior, or captor.

The man was tall, lean, an air of confidence about him that made him seem twice as tall. He wore an all black coat with all black pants and a pair of padded leather boots, in one hand he held a gilded cane, which was similarly black with a golden handle. He seemed no older than forty, though the paleness to his skin and slight sunkenness to his eyes made him seem older, and gave him a look like he had seen the worst of the worst. He had faded blondish hair and a patient expression on his face, as if he was waiting for her to finish examining him.

“Who are you?” She finally asked.

He extended a long, slender hand to her, as if for her to shake, then he spoke in a casual sort of way, “I am Professor Bartholomew, but you may call me Dr. Barlow,” he said.

A warm, friendly smile played across his lips, and she decided that he at least deserved a handshake for rescuing her, “I’m Delilah,” she said.

She still wasn’t sure what his intentions were, or why he was so friendly to her. When they did shake hands, she noticed that his skin was just as pure as hers, without the corruptive touch of the infection.

“Perhaps we should ascend to my study so you can warm up from the cold?” He suggested.

She nodded silently to his request and followed him, the stairs creaked softly underfoot as she looked around the spacious entryway that made up the two story abode. The room was fairly empty, aside from the staircase that lined the left hand wall, and then took a right angle up along the back wall to reach the second floor. The ceiling was unnaturally high, making the room loom around her, the shadows barely disturbed by the flicker of wall lanterns. His choice in art only added to the sense of dread that permeated her skull, paintings of horrific nature hung along the wall. All of the artwork depicted some sort of horror or another, from the bloody and grotesque to the lurking leviathan in the deep.

When they entered his study, a fire crackled in its fireplace against the wall, with two high backed cushioned armchairs in front of it. The walls were lined with shelves that stretched all the way up to the ceiling, with books stuffed into every spot available. Barlow sat in one of the arm chairs, and she sat in the other, both of them now gazed into the fire as it cackled quietly. She found it odd that he didn’t speak, in fact he seemed to be patiently waiting for her to speak. For the time, the two sat in silence, Delilah took the opportunity to warm her numbed fingers in front of the fire. Eventually, her curiosity and suspicion demanded an answer, and she forced herself to break the silence with a question.

“Why did you save me?” She asked.

“Save you?” He said.

“From the church, from the monks that chased me?” She pushed.

“How do you know I’m not a member of the inquisition luring you into a trap?” He asked.

“Are you?” She demanded.

“I am not,” he replied.

She narrowed her gaze toward him as she grew frustrated by his responses, how easily he seemed to be toying with her. Despite the shadows cast by the fireplace, she could see a slight upward bend on the corner of his lips as if he found this amusing. She decided a different line of approach might be necessary to get answers from him.

“Why aren’t you infected?” She asked.

“Why aren’t you?” He retorted.

It seemed that he was just as curious about her as she was of him, perhaps if she gave him the answer he sought, he’d give one in return.

“I don’t believe that the infection is a gift, nor do I believe that the Plague Father is a true God,” Delilah said.

“Isn’t he? He’s made his followers resistant to the frost, he’s saved hundreds from amputations and made it possible for us to adapt to the cold. That’s certainly more than any other God has done for us, don’t you think?” He asked.

He spoke in a tone as if he wanted to push Delilah to see what her response would be, rather than demanding her agreement.

“If that were true, he would have come before the frost to save billions from it. He only came here when there was no one else to turn to,” Delilah responded.

She returned her gaze to the fire, yet she saw a slight nod from him, as if he agreed with her point and wished for her to continue.

“I avoided the infection because that’s what my parents would’ve wanted; they were oppressed all their lives, so why should I let myself be enslaved to someone I’ve never seen. If he is a God, he’s not very good at it. The old God didn’t interfere with us, why should this new one suddenly take interest in us?” She asked.

“Where are you parents?” He asked.

“Dead probably. They were servants in London before the freeze, and only managed to buy one ticket for the boat, so they sent me as an orphan. I was just a baby then, but I was taken aboard and raised in an orphanage before the child worker laws were enacted. One day I decided to run away from the orphanage after one of the older boys ripped my shirt off in the backroom. I shouted for help but no one showed up. I punched him as hard as I could and ran. When I snuck back a week later, all the children were infected as part of the mass mandate by the church,” Delilah said.

Her eyes gazed through the fire as she recounted her childhood, her mind returned to the crusty, leaky, orphanage where she grew up. She remembered the way the wind slipped through the cracks in the walls and through the thin blanket she kept over herself at night. She remembered the stinging sensation on her knuckles whenever she picked the wrong soup spoon. There were the long hours of sitting in class, learning the proper etiquette for how to properly address a wealthy man or woman on the street.

“None of the academics, or wealthy elite with houses near the furnace are forced to accept the pestilence since it affects the brain just as much as the body. Through the infection the Plague Father is able to afford a slight amount of mind control over those infected. It doesn’t present itself as obviously noticeable; however, people who are infected tend to be more easily controlled by a strong pragmatic figure, like for instance, a fanatic preacher. Since the overseer needs his engineers, scientists and academics to be free thinking, we are spared from the mandatory infection. Similarly, the upper class are made up of rich businessmen that own most of the machinery now used to drill through the ice wall to find frozen trees. There are also plenty of coal barons who owned large monopiles of coal mines prior to the freeze, and now run the mines that power the furnace. Without coal or lumber, the entire city would falter and die so the overseer lets them do as they please in peace. As long as their houses are heated and their bellies full of food straight from the greenhouses, these industrialists have no need to be infected. This freedom from the infection vexes the church, but they require our help as much as we require theirs. They keep order and maintain stability, while we improve the city as well as keep it running. It’s a cold war really, pardon the pun, as neither side likes the position of the other. There are colleagues of mine that appreciate what Father Gungi does, however, they also repeatedly deny offers to be ‘gifted’ the infection,” Barlow said.

“So what do you think of it? The Plague Father? Father Gungi? The Church?” Delilah asked.

He sat in silence, his gaze firmly upon the fire as he thought about how to best respond to her question, when nothing came to mind, he shrugged his shoulders.

“They all have their place, I’m sure, though I know that if it were up to Gungi, he’d have us all infected or killed,” he said.

Delilah realized that one way or another, Dr. Barlow was as much an outcast as she was, intently watched by the church and listed first on who to banish or execute if things went wrong.

Dr. Barlow stood with a soft creak to his bones as he looked down to her with that same friendly smile from before.

“Well, you must want to rest after all that running earlier. The guest bedroom is currently unoccupied and will hopefully suit you well. I must retire for the night as well, in the morning we can discuss what you wish to do now that you’re on the run,” he said.

He then strode out from the study to one of the tall sets of double doors in the hallway, when he pushed it open, Delilah’s jaw almost dropped. As promised, the guest bedroom sat before her, a spacious room with a king sized bed in the center of the room with puffy white sheets and soft, plush, pillows. She couldn’t help herself as she went over to the bed and pushed her hand down against the mattress, her hand slowly sunk into the velvety smoothness of the sheets.

“If you wish, there are clothes that may fit you in the dresser, as well as a bath if you wish to clean yourself,” he said.

He pointed a finger toward a door on one side of the bedroom that led into a tiled bathroom, complete with a copper bathtub in one corner of the room.

“This is all so much,” she said.

“Well, if you wish to sleep outside, there are plenty of alleys around here for you,” he paused, “That was a joke.”

When she didn’t laugh, he let out a small sigh, as if saddened by the failure of his humor, before he wished her goodnight and quietly shut the bedroom door behind himself. This left Delilah alone in the cushy room, with a tall glass window that looked out toward the central

tower. She stripped from her stained and tattered clothes, and promptly crawled into the bed with a delighted groan of approval. The softness of the bed, and the warmth of the blanket was something of a heavenly experience for Delilah. It took her some time to fall asleep, as she was unused to a bed that actually adjusted and cradled her body instead of hard, stationary lumber. Eventually, she did fall asleep, cozy, comfy, and warm, a combination that made her forget her troubles, for the night at least.

The sun slipped a single beam of light between the darkened curtains and into Delilah's room as she awoke all at once and sat up with eyes wide. The quiet room returned her gaze as she realized that she hadn't dreamt the whole encounter last night, and that she did indeed fall asleep in an actual bed. It felt strange for her to wake up after the morning work whistle, and yet in her deep slumber she hadn't heard its ghostly wail.

She slid out of bed and padded over to the bathroom, her gaze now set upon the copper bathtub as she parted the curtains to let some of the sunlight in. With a twist of one of the metal knobs, the metal spout gurgled before a steady stream of hot water slowly filled the interior of the tub. Since she didn't have a home, nor a tub of her own, bathing wasn't a regular occurrence for her. The closest thing she had to bathing was pouring melted snow over herself and then quickly drying off before the water turned to ice on her skin.

Delilah spent a long while enjoying the luxury of bathing, only climbing from the tub when the water began to cool. Inside of the dresser, she found mostly dresses, and as she was used to pants and shirts, she didn't find herself thrilled to slip into the long silken skirts. She didn't have much of a choice as she realized the pile of her old clothes had been collected whilst

she slept. Instead, she put on a moss green dress with a sleek greyish fur coat. Thankfully her boots were still around and she pulled those back onto her feet.

When she left her room, she found the hallways quiet, the paintings still stared down at her, but the light diminished their dreadful gaze. She found the study empty, with the fireplace silent, and wondered where Barlow was. The answer came in the form of faint voices that sluggishly echoed up the steps and to her ear. Soft voices talked between one another, and Delilah cautiously descended the staircase, one stair at a time, to not disturb the talk. She stopped at the edge of the arch into the doctor's workshop, and soon heard his voice amidst the chatter.

"He must be within the central tower. There's no other place for him to hide. Our agent confirmed that inquisition headquarters held no sign of him," Dr. Barlow said.

"Yes, but did our agent get through every locked door? The inquisition holds many secrets, secrets which only the high level officers know," a female voice responded.

"There was no sign of corruption within the headquarters. The most logical place is within the central tower. The furnace of the tower is strong enough to burn even the most powerful corruption, it would be the ideal place to keep such a being," Dr. Barlow said.

"What if you're wrong? We only get one shot at this, only the overseer is permitted to have complete access to the entire tower. He's largely left us alone, despite the church's attempts to indoctrinate us. If we attack him and fail, the entire academic district will be infected," the female voice said.

"If I'm wrong, then we all pay the price regardless. At least this has a possibility of success. Inquisition headquarters is far more secure, while the tower is permeable to engineers, all we need are the right men in the right places," Dr. Barlow said.

“I’ll see to asking my contacts about infiltrating the tower’s mechanic list,” the female voice replied.

“If there’s nothing more, I believe my guest is awake. We’ll discuss more tomorrow,” Dr. Barlow said.

The sounds of footsteps echoed through the spacious interior as Barlow and his colleague walked to the entryway, so that Barlow could see her off. Delilah stood at the bottom of the stairs unsure if she should go back up the stairs, or come out to meet Barlow and the woman with him. Before she could decide, Barlow entered the entryway through the open arch that connected the dining room to the entryway. He then looked over at Delilah and extended a hand toward the woman that stood beside him, to politely introduce her to Delilah.

“This is my esteemed colleague, Dr. Robertson. She served in parliament in old London, and now works within the overseer’s council,” Barlow explained.

Delilah took a moment to study the other doctor, a woman who seemed to carry the weight of numerous decisions on her shoulders, and yet still took the time to offer a ‘how do you do’ with the utmost of sincerity. Her hair was black short and curly, and she wore a sleek hardy leather jacket over her body that gave her a refined, industrious look.

“Charmed, I wish you a pleasant day, madam,” Dr. Robertson said.

Delilah wasn’t sure what to do at first, then, she remembered the lessons taught to her on social etiquette when she was a child and performed an awkward curtsy. Dr. Robertson raised one of her brows but gave a small nod of her head in return before she briskly left through the front door.

“You’ll have to excuse the brief introduction. She’s overseeing many operations at the moment that all require her attention. As nice as it might be for her to sit down to tea with us, it would be impractical to keep her away from her work,” Barlow remarked.

“What sort of work?” Delilah asked.

She made it clear she wasn’t referring to her job on the overseer’s council as she peppered her tone with suspicion.

“There’ll be time enough to explain that after we sit down for brunch. I never guessed you were a late sleeper, but we all have our secrets,” Dr. Barlow said.

He seemed to be amused with his little word play of dodging her question while also alluding to it in the same sentence. As much as she wanted to push him on this further, he soon led her into the dining room and ushered her to one of the empty chairs that surrounded the maple wood table.

“Sit, sit, there is fresh pastry and a lovely oatmeal porridge for breakfast. Feel free to eat as much as you like,” Barlow said.

He sat down at the head of the table, with her at the chair directly to his right on the side of the table. Upon the table, a large basket filled with glistening freshly baked pastries beckoned her attention away from her line of inquiries. She didn’t bother grabbing a plate, instead she ravenously grabbed one of the rolls from the basket and wolfishly devoured it, her taste buds exploding with the sweet, sugary flavor. Barlow, for his part, merely sat and watched her eat, the amused look still on his face as he watched her chew through an entire sweet roll in under a minute.

He grabbed a pitcher of cold ice water and poured a glass for her, which she chugged down rapidly before returning to the pastry basket. After a short while to let her eat, he decided to elaborate further on her earlier question.

“I suppose since you’re a wanted criminal now, you won’t be too eager to spill our secrets to the inquisition if I do tell you. Besides, even if you do end up going to the inquisition, one of our agents can always silence you before you tell them too much,” he said.

The tone he took was something of a joking manner, but his eyes contained hints of sincerity to his threat. She remained silent as she took slower bites and listened to what he had to say.

“Dr. Robertson and I are part of a secret organization, a resistance if you will, that wishes to either find the Plague Father or expose the church as liars. Since the arrival of the Plague Father and his infections, there haven’t been any confirmed sightings of him, nor has anyone actually been able to verify his existence. Some of our scientists have a theory that the infections are just home grown bacteria that have a natural cold resistance. This would mean that the overseer and Father Gungi are using the guise of a pestilent God to ensure religious obedience. On the other hand, none of the medical doctors over in the hospital have ever seen this type of infection before and therefore cannot definitively point a finger at a man-made infection. If we were to pull back the curtain, we’d need to know which of the two answers is the correct one,” he explained.

“We?” Delilah asked.

This was more of a curious question rather than an accusation, she hadn’t been expected to be so quickly ushered into such a secret organization after just meeting one of its members.

“Did you expect me to think you wanted to go back to the streets, hunted by the inquisition and living life one bowl of soup to the next?” He said.

When he put it like that, it did make sense. It’s not like she had any friends in the inquisition or the church. Plus, with most of her acquaintances dead at the hands of the inquisition, and her name on the list of wanted heretics, she’d need to find somewhere safe. Though, the benefits of a warm bed, fresh food, and hot water surely convinced her more than her curiosity to answer the big question of whether or not the Plague Father existed.

“As I said last night, most of the intellectual types in this district are free from the mind control aspects of the infection. Therefore, we formed a bit of a secret group to keep an eye on the overseer and the Inquisition. When none of our agents found concrete evidence of the Plague Father, nor any sort of viable first hand account of someone actually seeing him, we began to wonder if the whole thing was just a cover up. If the overseer wished to declare himself the new God of the land, he’d have much more resistance to the sudden change, but, if a pestilent God came around and offered a cure against the frost, well, you get the drift. It only seemed a natural thing to do after the expeditionary team came back with their findings,” Barlow said.

He then stood up, and walked out of the room, opening a drawer in the next room before he came back with a stack of papers. He handed the stack of papers to Delilah, who quickly wiped her fingers on a napkin before beginning to read.

“In an effort to see if we were indeed the last city, because the name would be a bit awkward if we weren’t,” he paused to see if his joke landed. When she didn’t laugh, he continued, “the overseer sent out an expeditionary team to search for any other cities or outposts that survived the freeze. As you can see in those reports, none of them did, and all of them failed in one way or another,” he said.

Delilah read through the reports and felt, but a wave of nausea overtook her, perhaps it was from the half a dozen sweet rolls she chewed through, or perhaps it was due to the grisly nature of the reports. Entire caravans found frozen in the midst of the waste, hundreds of people turned into ice sculptures or eaten by desperate, vicious, wildlife. Another city, Winterholm, which was less than a day's trek away, was found to have similar designs as the Last City. So much so that both cities had identical central tower designs; however, Winterholm's mysteriously exploded one day. Without the central furnace to provide heat, the entire city slowly froze with over five hundred residents dead. In the report, it listed details that seemed to hint that not everyone died from the cold, that at least half died from wounds sustained in combat. Skulls were bashed in, arms were hacked off, and bodies mutilated by blades and beaten by blunt objects. Dozens of makeshift weapons were found scattered amongst the bodies, and several bodies showed marks of cannibalism.

“The people of Winterholm weren't content with their overseer, so they rebelled. In their rebellion they over-exerted their central furnace in an effort to make it run longer and hotter. The end result caused the furnace to overheat, mechanisms to catastrophically fail and end with a massive explosion. Those that didn't die in the rebellion, soon died afterward due to the cold. Much like us, they didn't know there were other survivors, they thought they were the last ones left. With the reports from Winterholm, the overseer shutdown the expeditionary program and refused to send any other teams out. There may be other cities out there, but for now the overseer doesn't want anyone to know of Winterholm or its ending. His job is certainly made easier because the people here believe in a divine being that watches over them and protects them. The overseer thinks that the only way we can survive is if we're completely unified, even if that unification is formed on the basis of a lie,” Barlow said.

“So what happens if you do find the truth? Do we revolt like Winterholm?” Delilah asked.

Barlow didn't respond, instead he just sort of smiled, a saddened, defeated sort of smile.

“Truthfully, I don't know, I don't have an answer for that. The people all seem content with their lot in life, and even if the church brutalizes those who don't agree, as long as the central furnace continues to function, no one has to worry,” he said.

She hadn't expected that answer, though if she had the chance to deliver a decision that may or may not doom humanity, she didn't know what she'd do either. For all she knew, the last city was a truthfully earned title. If there were sudden revelations that had high chances of sparking unrest, she thought that perhaps they should stay hidden. The message of the church seemed to support this hypothesis, in a subverted type of way. The infection was taken to ensure humanity's survival, not to destroy it with an incurable plague. She doubted that anyone wanted to have boils, rashes, or pus filled pimples and grotesque bodies just for the fun of it.

“What do you want with me?” She asked.

Delilah couldn't help but be suspicious, perhaps more curious at this point, of what exactly he wished for her to do now that she was more or less in his debt. Her time on the street had taught her that everything has a price, and nothing is done simply out of the kindness of one's heart. This latter fact always struck Delilah as a bit ironic considering the message of the church was to thank the Plague Father for his generosity. From her experience, everything cost something, be it work for meal tickets or meal tickets for food. From the church's messages, the so-called God of the Plague Father gifted the citizens with the infection out of pure kindness. After talking with Dr. Barlow, she felt that perhaps kindness wasn't the real reason to have such a benevolent God watch over the last bastion of humanity.

“You are my guest, I don’t want anything from you, nor do I need anything in return. We are all humans down here in this crater, stuck together until this snow melts, if it ever does melt, the least we can do is treat one another with compassion. Though the church rules with brutality under the guise of kindness, and the overseer rules through the convent, I tend to believe that if there is a God watching over us, he’d want us to at least act like humans. The convent makes people believe they are sheep, following a shepherd that might not even be real, while the monks act as wolves to remove any sheep that stray off the path. I believe that our rights as humans allow us to make the choices we want, even if that means dealing with the exceptionally terrible ones,” he said.

Delilah didn’t expect a full philosophical quandary, more of whether or not he needed her for making tea, or fetching messages for him. Still, it was nice to know where he stood, and how he viewed everyone else stuck down in the last city. Something troubled her, however, when she thought about what she heard earlier, of his plan to infiltrate the tower. Surely an operation of that magnitude couldn’t be hidden from the overseer for long.

“How are you going to infiltrate the tower if you don’t know the people you’re sending aren’t actually just Inquisition spies? You did say that the church wanted to get rid of you, so it’d make sense for them to be watching,” she said.

“We have dependable people, along with enough blackmail to ensure no one does decide to go to the Inquisition. Just because I recognize the good in people doesn’t mean that I also don’t recognize how easy it is to slip into evil. When I shake a man’s hand I always stand with my knees bent, so I can kick them in the shins if they try to harm me,” he said.

The tone in which he spoke made it seem like he was energetic, almost as if he found it thrilling to demolish the shins of those that tried to wrong him. She did wonder how many people

suffered a broken shin or two as a result, though she thought to keep that question silent for the time being.

“If you are looking for something to do, you could deliver these messages for me,” he said.

He pulled out a stack of envelopes from the drawer of the cabinet before he went over to the closet beside the entryway door and pulled out a fluffy fur hat.

“Wear this, and make sure to keep it on at all times, if you look like you belong, fewer people will tend to question you or look at you. Church patrols are usually small, and I doubt they’ll look in the middle of the street for you, so try not to be too suspicious,” he said.

It seemed like a simple enough job, nothing too hard, nor dangerous; however, there was a slight shadow hiding upon Barlow’s face. Beneath that calm demeanor on his face, a shadow of fear barely peeked out around his mask, not of her, but of something else. He kept it fairly well hidden, but she knew how to recognize fear, especially after spending so much time with fellow outcasts.

“Is something troubling you Doctor?” She asked.

He smoothed back a strand of stray hair from his forehead as he kept that warm blanket of his usual smile on his face.

“Nothing out of the ordinary, why do you ask?” He responded.

“Just wondering, do you need anything while I’m out?” She asks.

“I don’t believe so, it might take you a while to deliver them all, we’ll meet back here for lunch,” he said.

Delilah still had her doubts, but she didn’t push it further, maybe because he had every right to worry about possibly verifying the existence of a divine being. Or, he might pull back the

curtain and cause a mass revolt that could destroy the last of humanity in a single day, surely nothing to worry about.

She left Barlow's manor and spent the rest of the morning going up and down the streets of the science district, delivering letters to certain addresses. As Barlow expected, none of the citizens on the street gave her a second look, and some even gave greetings to her as they passed by. She did keep her distance from patrols, skirting down side streets to keep out of view from them and avoid them recognizing her on some off chance. Delilah did feel awkward as she tried to maintain an air of confidence and fearlessness, something she rarely openly presented. Before this, she made sure to keep to the sides of the road, and to walk behind groups of people to blend in. Now, she walked down the middle of the street with her head held high, her eyes gazing across the dozens of faces that passed her. None of the citizens around her seemed too interested, as most appeared to avoid eye contact while those that did hold her gaze gave small nods or dispensed a pleasant greeting.

Despite the feeling of being generally unnoticed, Delilah couldn't shake the suspicion that she was being watched. Every now and then she glanced over her shoulder or scanned the faces in front of her, and every time she failed to see the source of this suspicious presence. When she returned to Dr. Barlow's manor home, she found the front door locked, and a note that read he was out on errands of his own. She picked up the note from the door and read it, wondering what she should do next, and if she should wait for him to return or wander around a while longer.

"Back so soon? I didn't expect you for at least another half an hour," Barlow said.

Delilah's heart jumped through her chest at the sudden startling appearance of Barlow as he rounded a corner out of a side alley and stepped up to the front porch where Delilah waited.

When she turned to confront him about this, she noticed that the end of his cane was coated in a dense mush of reddish liquid that looked eerily like blood. He didn't seem too concerned about this, as he ushered her through the front door of his home, his eyes cast back to the street as he did so. When he slid off his heavy winter boots, she noticed the treads of his boots were coated in a similar dark, red, gluey substance. The more apparent suspicious marker came from his jacket, as she noticed a darkened spot on his back with a small vertical slit in the cotton fabric.

She quickly wrapped her scarf around the palm of her hand as she pressed it down against the wet, bloodied, fabric in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

"You could have said you were bleeding!" She said, urgently.

"Oh that? It's just a scratch, nothing more," he said, dismissively.

Though the way he winced when she pressed her scarf against the wound told her otherwise and she quickly led him to the dining room so he could sit in one of the arm chairs.

"How did you get this? Did one of the monks attack you?" She questioned.

She pulled his heavy winter jacket off, and slipped up his shirt to look at the extent of the wound beneath the various layers of clothes he wore. There was a deep gash on the right of his back, at a twisted sort of angle as if he had tried to avoid whatever stabbed him. The shape and depth of the wound looked like something done by a knife, or something long and sharp.

"You could say that, it seems my suspicions were right, we are being watched," Barlow said.

His breaths were wheezy and his eyes fluttered in their sockets as she held tight to the wound not knowing if he had any bandages or first aid supplies in his home.

"Being watched? By who? I think stabbing you is a bit of an escalation from just watching," she said.

Panic seeped into her voice as she was struck with a paralyzing sense of fear and dread, trying to save the life of the man that had saved her, without knowing how to fix this.

Before she could ask further, there came a loud SMASH from down the hall and past the staircase, toward the rear of the house.

“I hoped incapacitating the two scouts might slow them down, but it seems they’re more than ready to kill me,” Barlow wheezed.

“You’re not dying, and no one’s killing anyone, we’re leaving before they can,” Delilah argued.

She peeked out of the dining room and down the hallway to the back door where a group of robed, masked men swiftly entered through the kicked in doorway. Delilah let out a curse beneath her breath as she swiftly returned to Barlow, wrapping the jacket back around his shoulders and hefting him to his feet.

“Come on! We’ll get you to the hospital district. They’ll patch you up there!” Delilah said.

Barlow coughed a fine mist of bloody droplets into his handkerchief even as he shook his head at the suggestion.

“There’s no time. If they’re here for me, you have to warn Robertson before it’s too late. Leave me, sprint down the street to the engineering district, find Robertson,” Barlow wheezed.

Delilah grits her teeth as she hefted most of Barlow’s weight onto her back and shoulder, holding him upright as she practically carried him.

“You’re not getting out of this easily old man,” she said.

“Old? I’m barely thirty,” he said.

Though she didn't look up to his face, out of the corner of her eye she could see his amused smile as he no doubt found his joke funny, even at a time like this. She dragged him into the hallway, and when the robed men charged down the hall at them, she grabbed a vase on the countertop and threw it at the lead runner.

"The drawer, the top left drawer," Barlow wheezed.

At first Delilah didn't know if he was just delirious or if he wanted her to retrieve his hat or something, but she decided to throw open the drawer of the dresser on the top left to humor him. Inside of the drawer there didn't appear to be anything unusual, until she noticed the button on the side of the drawer, nearly hidden by the various pairs of mittens. With the masked men nearly upon them, Delilah pushed the button and watched as one of the pictures in the hallway suddenly exploded.

A shower of glass, nails and pieces of wood blew outward like a shotgun blast, shredding the masked men into pieces of meat jerky. Then the next painting down the hallway exploded, and the next, and soon the hallway turned into a killing field. Delilah didn't stay to watch the carnage, nearly stumbling due to the first blast, she grit her teeth and hauled Barlow with her. For once, she found herself thankful for all those long hours working the transport hub. The days she spent lifting crates of coal made it somewhat easier for her to lift and carry Barlow, dragging him along through the street.

She didn't know where she was going, nor did she try to stop for directions. Chaos befell the entire science and engineering sector as doors were smashed in and the robed men searched the district house by house. With all the confusion, Delilah slipped from side alley to side alley, a return to her element as she avoided the much denser patrols of the robed men. Entire buildings were ransacked and searched, while dozens of scientists and engineers were held in chains out in

the streets. She knew she had to keep moving, but she also knew that if she didn't find Robertson soon, Barlow would bleed out from his injuries.

Halfway down second street, a coal dusted miner quickly approached Delilah and Barlow as they left one of the side alleys. Delilah grit her teeth as she saw the miner jogging to reach them, and she knew that she couldn't outrun him while carrying Barlow. She didn't have any sort of weapon to fight him either, and she doubted that she could fight him without someone taking notice. When he approached, he raised his hands to his chest in a motion to show he meant no harm as he looked up and down the street for any robed patrols.

"That's Doctor Barlow, yes? Professor Robertson sent me to look for him, come, you must hurry before the inquisitors see him," the miner said.

Delilah didn't have many options, so for the moment she decided to trust this man, even as she tried to work out a better solution in case he turned out to be an informant for the inquisition.

"What's going on? What's with all the robes and masks?" Delilah asked.

The miner went on the other side of Barlow, hefting him up and taking most of the weight off Delilah's shoulders as he hurried down the street.

"They're the Black Hand, the muscle of the inquisition," the miner replied.

"I thought the monks were the muscle of the inquisition," Delilah said.

"The monks are just hired thugs to keep order, like a police force, the Black Hand is more akin to a military force, they get called out for large scale operations, like this. Seems Gungi and the overseer caught wind of our plans and decided to get rid of it," the miner said.

They moved quickly down the streets, avoiding the larger clusters of Black Hand patrols before they came to one of the greenhouses used to grow crops amongst the frigid ice. Densely

placed copper pipes ran along the stone walls of the greenhouse, keeping the stone warmed and the freeze out.

A group of workers stood at the door to the greenhouse, loitering, or perhaps blocking the entrance in case any inquisitor happened to walk by. When they saw Barlow being carried by the miner and Delilah, they quickly parted to let the trio through.

“Get the Doc! Clear a path! Clear a path!” the miner shouted.

The hallway they ran down was packed with people from all the various districts, from the miners, to hunters and farmers, to the academics of the science district. They all pushed themselves against the walls when the miner ran through with Barlow over his shoulder and Delilah following closely behind.

Inside the greenhouse, the sight of so many living, lush green plants made Delilah temporarily pause to look at the rows and rows of fresh vegetables and fruits being grown. Normally, only the farmers were allowed in the greenhouses, to prevent any food theft as all food production was strictly monitored by the overseer and by extension, the church. She didn't linger too long, as there were more pressing matters to attend to, like whether or not Barlow could survive his injuries.

“Doc! Barlow's down, looks like a Black Hand stabbed him!” the miner called out.

The miner brought Barlow into a side room of the greenhouse, and laid him down upon a long steel table, perhaps for sorting out the vegetables before they were sent to the various cook houses. A stout, bald, man stood at one of the sinks, washing his hands before he turned to assess his new patient. He wore a leather apron over a dense wool shirt, a plethora of medical tools sat in pockets across his apron and he soon went to work on Barlow.

Delilah wanted to stay, to be there for her only friend, however, one of the farmers came in and grabbed Delilah's shoulder,

"Professor Robertson wants to see you now," the farmer said.

Delilah nodded and began to follow, though she paused at the door to look back at Barlow. If there was a God out there, she was close to praying to him. Professor Robertson stood at a large table, with a map of the city rolled out before her, and several people standing around the table. As Delilah entered, the crowd of people seemed to be dispersing, perhaps already filled in on what they were supposed to do. She slipped through the throng of people to the table, where the Professor waited with a slight scowl on her face.

"Professor Robertson, you wished to see me?" Delilah said,

"Yes, first I wanted to extend my thanks for saving Doctor Barlow from the Black Hand, the raid wasn't something we expected so soon," Robertson replied.

There was a slight pause as the two looked at one another, and Delilah almost thought that Robertson was sizing her up before she spoke again.

"I have a job for you, something vital to our plan, I'm short staffed as it is with the Black Hand blindsiding us, otherwise I wouldn't ask this of you." Another pause, and Delilah nodded for her to continue. "The overseer has the central tower on lockdown, and we won't be able to fight through the church masses in central square. The only way we get through now, is if we create a diversion on one side and take a small team in when the diversion starts," Robertson said.

"It must be one good diversion if both the Black Hand and every monk are going to respond to it," Delilah remarked.

"We're going to crash the coal train into the tower," Robertson said, straight faced.

Delilah expected it to be a joke, something made to lighten the mood since Barlow was in critical condition, but when Robertson showed no sign of comedic intent, Delilah realized the severity of the plan.

“Won’t that destroy the tower? If that happens we all die, you know that right?” Delilah asked.

Delilah felt as if she was asking a rhetorical question here, surely the academic ex-parliament member would realize how utterly insane that plan sounded.

“The tower is reinforced enough at its base that there’s only a small chance of complete destruction. This is the only way to get to the tower, nothing else will create a big enough disturbance. If we try something else we run the risk of being caught before we reach the tower,” Robertson stated.

“It seems a bit extreme to prove whether or not the Plague Father exists,” Delilah said.

Robertson seemed confused at that statement, as she stood up from the map and looked at Delilah.

“Doctor Barlow didn’t tell you?” Robertson asked.

“Tell me what? What’s going on?” Delilah said.

“The Plague Father is just a myth, something made up by the church. I know Doctor Barlow may say otherwise but he’s been reading too many theological books. No, our plan is to take the tower and force the church, the inquisition, Father Gungi and the overseer to surrender. If we take the tower, we control the furnace, and heat distribution throughout the city, if they don’t meet our demands, we start cutting off heat, shut down the furnace if we have to,” Robertson explained.

“But, that’ll leave hundreds without warmth, the freeze will get to them, frostbite will be just as rampant as it was before the infection came,” Delilah said.

“I know, we all do, but this is the only way to get change, you saw the Black Hand out there today, you know just how ruthless they are. The overseer and Father Gungi are tyrants that rule the city with an iron fist. We’re here to change that. Think of Dr. Barlow, he’s a wanted criminal now, just like you, do you think he’d be able to survive on the streets, wounded as he is? How long before the inquisition finds him, or finds you? The clock is ticking, and you know it, this is the only way you’ll ever be safe in the city again,” Robertson said.

As crazy as it all sounded, and it did seem insane, Robertson did have a point, one that left Delilah with two options, both of which were not pleasant. Either she turned her back and continued her life on the run, living perhaps another year, another two years, maybe more, maybe less, or she embraced her criminal status and helped take over the city. Though option two might also mean the possibility of destroying the city, or leaving hundreds without heat in the frigid cold, on the hope that two fanatic dictators stepped down from power.

“Alright, alright, what do I need to do?” She asked.

Delilah didn’t know what else to do, she couldn’t just ignore this and go back to her life as if nothing was happening. On the other hand, she wasn’t exactly eager to lay down her life for a bunch of strangers, even if one of them was kind to her. At this point her own curiosity was getting the better of her as she wondered what secrets the overseer did hide within the tower. Did the Plague Father exist? What was the Plague Father? Was it truly all one big ruse by the overseer and Gungi? She needed to find answers, she needed to know what was happening within that tower. This was the one in a lifetime opportunity she needed to find out the truth, whether the resistance won or lost it didn’t matter to her. In the end, she knew she’d be hunted

down the inquisition eventually and she was tired of spending her life running. With her one sanctuary gone, most of her friends dead and nowhere left to go, Delilah decided to do the only thing she could; run. This time was different; all her life she spent running away from the church and the overseer. Now, she'd run right at them.

The heat from the central tower made beads of sweat skim along Delilah's brow, though she wondered how much of it was from the heat and how much was from her nerves as she tried not to overthink matters. At the moment, she was crouching behind a cluster of crates with the rest of the team Robertson picked out. There were about a dozen people in total, including Robertson and Delilah, and they all seemed calm and composed despite the task at hand. The silence dragged on as Delilah tried to keep her breathing slow and steady, hoping the convent monks couldn't hear the pounding in her chest. Of course, the monks were nearly a hundred feet away, closer to the dark steel walls that made up the base of the tower, but at this point Delilah felt like she had a bass drum beating through her chest.

From the other side of the town came the loud, piercing wail of the train's whistle, and Robertson gave the signal to start moving forward. The group rose from their positions behind cover and began to move toward the tower, slowly at first, but soon moving quicker. A few of the monks saw them and were about to scream when there suddenly came a chorus of shouting from the other side of the tower followed by a massive explosion. The sheer blast was enough to knock Delilah backward, and a horrific sounding groan echoed from the tower as it tilted slightly backward.

No time to stop and watch, the train collision certainly did its job as the entire square was thrown into chaos as fire ravaged the debris of the train. Delilah kept herself behind Robertson,

sprinting with all her power as she ran toward the central tower. Any monk who would have been in their path had either been cleared by the explosion or was now on the other side trying to contain the fire. One of the engineers ran forth with a special key that opened one of the maintenance shafts on the tower, and soon enough Delilah found herself crouching and walking through the dark metal vents.

She could hear the hiss and thumping of machinery all around her, and the constant blanket of heat made her wonder how anyone could work here without melting. Eventually, the group came to a metal panel, which, when removed, led them into the central workings of the tower. They stood inside a tall room, so tall that Delilah could barely see the ceiling, if there was one. In the middle of the room stood a massive machine, the furnace itself, the beating heart of the city. Multiple chutes and hundreds of pipes ran to and from the furnace, like veins and arteries, while massive thunderous pistons worked to pump the collected heat through the city.

“Central control is just up this way, along with the overseer’s office,” the engineer said.

The group moved through the machinery, past bundles of pipes and spinning gears and across walkways overlooking rivers of coal. When they reached the central control room, more of an overlook, which was walled in by panels covered with dials, switches and levers, a frantic man stood before the central panel, flipping switches and pulling down levers.

“No, no, no! Do you know what you’ve done! You imbeciles!” The man shouted.

He turned swiftly, a flintlock pistol in his hand, the rest of his body covered by a long maroon overcoat and dense grayish clothes that looked almost like fire proof insulation.

“With the little stunt you pulled, the furnace will need to be shut down for repairs for at least a full day!” He screamed.

“The city can survive without heat for a single day,” Robertson argued.

“It’s not about the city you fool! Don’t you see? Have you ever seen it? I thought you were the smart one Professor but you’re just as moronic as your followers! You’ve doomed us all!” He shouted.

“The city will survive, the tower can be repaired, but your reign ends here and now,” Robertson said.

“It’s not about my reign! It’s not about your reign! It’s about what the furnace’s other purpose is! Don’t you see? The furnace isn’t here to just keep us warm, this entire crater wasn’t built for us, it was dug out to find him! And when our predecessors found him, they built the furnace to make sure he never escaped! In their hunt to discover a way to save humanity, they found something that could only further doom us!” He shouted.

“What is he talking about? Does he mean the Plague Father?” Delilah asked.

The Overseer laughed at her question, a fanatic desperate laugh as he gripped the sides of his head like a madman hearing voices. The pistol pressed against the side of his head as he did so.

“The Plague Father? A name given to him by Father Gungi to cover up what he really is, a sleeping evil. He was never supposed to be roused from his slumber, he was supposed to sleep until the end of days but humanity found him early. In our entitled pursuit of salvation, we awoke something that only sees us as maggots to feast upon. We asked it for help and what did it give us? The infection? Hardly! The original infection turned our ancestors into demons, into monsters so putrid that when the freeze set in globally, it was a blessing! The freeze is the only reason he’s still here, otherwise he would have infected the entire globe! The freeze slowed him, slowed him and his monsters so that we could build the furnace, keep him locked away, and he was, until you came along and messed it up!” He screamed.

He pointed the pistol at Robertson, the barrel trembling in his grasp. His eyes were wide but his pupils fluttered as he looked around at some invisible force.

“What are you talking about? The Plague Father doesn’t exist, it’s a myth, a legend, created by Gungi to keep us all in line, your little charade ends here, whether you like it or not,” Robertson said.

The overseer, however, seemed to be completely unaware of her statement, as he looked around, aiming the pistol up, down and all around himself.

“Stop laughing! STOP LAUGHING! STOP IT!” He cried.

He then leapt atop the central panel, standing just on the edge of a fifty foot drop as he looked to the ceiling and proclaimed,

“You won’t have me! You hear! You won’t take me! I won’t become one of your monsters!”

“Wait! Don’t!” Delilah shouted.

Before she could stop him, or anyone could, the overseer raised the pistol to his head and pulled the trigger. His limp body fell backward into the maze of machinery, eventually smashing itself against the floor far below.

Delilah ran to the edge to look over, and when she looked back, she saw Robertson with a blank expression on her face.

“I knew he was paranoid, but this bordered on psychotic. He was so deep in Gungi’s lie that he didn’t want anybody to disprove it,” Robertson said.

Her voice seemed to have some hint of remorse, even as she stood at the central panel, now with the heart of the city at her fingertips.

“We won’t let that stop us, now that we have the furnace under control, we’ll broadcast our message and wait for Father Gungi and the inquisition to respond,” Robertson said.

Delilah still stood there, dumbfounded, confused as to how Robertson could get back to business so easily after watching a man rant and rave about some evil force lurking within the tower. Was it all a lie? Did she witness a man so driven that when his plans came crumbling down he finally self-destructed? Or was there something more, something that drove the overseer to his own demise?

While Robertson and the rest of the team seemed occupied with keeping their plan in motion, Delilah decided to slip away and find answers for herself. The dense inner webbing of pipes and machines provided plenty of shadows for Delilah to fade into, and Robertson seemed more focused on the next stage of their plan. The rest of the team were similarly distracted with the control system of the furnace, leaving Delilah a clear exit.

Beneath the furnace, and beneath the support struts that kept the furnace lifted off the ground, several large metal tubes funneled straight down from the furnace and into the ground. There didn’t seem to be any apparent purpose for them, and the sheer size of the pipes seemed unlikely for steam venting. The placement at the bottom of the furnace, and the way the furnace itself was lifted off the ground meant that these pipes could funnel down the burning coal. Delilah knew there were plenty of ways to vent excess heat, judging by how many emergency valves were located in the control room, so she wondered what the purpose of these pipes was.

She soon found a heavy metal door, which slid open after she turned the crank wheel on the front of it. A darkened corridor descended before her, and Delilah saw multiple smaller pipes running along the corridor’s walls. The pipes radiated heat, so hot that Delilah didn’t dare touch

them for fear of burning herself. She instead headed down the steep descent, down into the depths beneath the furnace. A lantern hung on the side of the wall by the door and Delilah grabbed it and lit it so she could have some light as she followed the path down.

The corridor twisted in a spiral, and Delilah found herself wondering how far she descended as she kept on following the downward curve of the wall before her. Eventually she came to a second heavy door, and this one required a key to gain entry. Delilah saw that there already was a key in the lock, and the door itself was partly opened, allowing Delilah to push it open further and enter the room.

The room she entered was large, spacious, and circular, bigger than a warehouse in length and height. On the ceiling, she saw the same large pipes from before, only the pipes stopped at the ceiling and instead had metal hatches over them as if prepared to dump something into the room. At first the smell didn't hit her, until it did when she fully entered the room and she recoiled back at the foul aroma of death and decay.

In the center of the room, upon a throne of steaming hot pipes, a massive ungodly creature sat, chained and imprisoned for the moment being. Despite the fact that it was sitting, Delilah estimated it to be at least four times bigger than a normal man and as wide as a shack. It had a morbidly obese body that led up to a bulbous head that popped out of the top of its body, the neck so fat it just merged the line of where shoulders ended and neck started. Two great horns sprouted from either side of its head, similar to those of a moose, and across the blubbery belly, a massive open wound stretched diagonally from upper to lower gut. Within this deep gash, Delilah could see putrid organs, and maggots crawling along within them. Every now and then Delilah watched as pestilent insects crawled from its body, only to be burnt by the heat of

the pipes that made up the throne. The sound of hissing and sizzling bugs seemed a constant noise as the swarm tried to escape from the colossus, only to be fried by the copper throne.

In front of the throne, on his knees, Father Gungi knelt, he appeared to be praying to the slumbering being. Suddenly the creature stirred, the pipes hissing and more bugs sizzled making Delilah step back a pace or two. Surely this creature couldn't be it, surely this giant grotesque abomination couldn't be the "loving" god of the Plague Father. Delilah looked around the room for anything else, and saw on the wall beside the entrance was a series of three levels with the label EMERGENCY EXTERMINATION written above it. She realized that they must control the hatches of the larger pipes above the creature, and that the larger pipes must funnel the burning coal down directly atop the creature itself.

"I see you child, a creature of self proposed intelligence, searching through the darkness for knowledge," a deep voice said to her.

When Delilah turned to look back at the throne, Gungi still remained on his knees, faced away from her, he couldn't have been the one speaking to her.

"Do not mistake me for the weak mind before me. Look upon me child, as I now look upon you," the voice commanded.

Delilah raised her gaze to look at the creature and saw its dark, hollow, sockets staring at her. The eyes of the creature were missing and instead replaced by millions of fly-like insects all simultaneously staring out at her.

"You are a child without purpose, without support or family. Like a feather in the ocean you dip and float with no real explanation for your own existence. You are but a babe in this unforgiving world, tossed around by the illusive winds of fate until you ended up here, before me," the voice said.

Delilah couldn't believe the Plague Father was speaking to her, not only because it seemed insane, but also because the creature's mouth didn't move, nor his entire body, he just sat there, staring at her.

The room suddenly felt extremely quiet, and she no longer heard the repetitive thumping of machinery above her head, or hissing pipes from the prison throne. Instead, Delilah only heard herself and the creature, his voice seemingly surrounding her as he spoke.

"I can offer what you seek, child. I can give you what you truly want; I can accept you," it explained.

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you going to eat me or infect me?" She asked.

"You need not fear me child; I seek only what is best for you and your kind. Humanity's extinction is no longer a question of if, but when. Extinction can be reversed, and if you assist me now I will grant you the acceptance you seek," the creature responded.

"You? Pardon the judgment but you don't look like someone who wants to give hugs and comfort to me. The overseer said the last time you were unleashed, you turned those who discovered you into monsters," She said.

"They awoke me earlier than what I foresaw. Two hundred years prior to us speaking, when men were discovering the use of machines to kill, they discovered me by accident. The men who found me were filled with greed, hatred and stubbornness. I did not find their desires worthy of my power. In their foolishness, they sought to unleash something humanity was neither ready for, nor deserved. Relentlessly, they continued to bother me, when persuasion failed them they turned to threats. When their threats failed to move me, they attempted cruel methods of torture to extract what they wanted. With each attempt failing they grew more and more desperate and eventually, in their desperation they turned to they were good at; killing.

Everyday they brought down innocent humans, and everyday these victims were murdered before me. I sought to save humans from themselves and these men seemed eager to show just how self-destructive humanity could be. This went on for years, and my patience grew thin, in a moment of anger I gave them what they wanted, a taste of my power,” it explained.

“And they became monsters?” Delilah guessed.

“They became what they were!” The voice boomed through her skull. “Mindless creatures of slaughter, they spread my influence across the globe.” It said with a long shuddering sigh.

“What happened? How did the freeze happen and leave you down here?” Delilah asked.

“The further away these mindless demons traveled, the less influence they received from my powers. The demons I created returned to their humanity, though they were not men, but evil wearing human flesh. I returned to my slumber in hopes they would die off, in hopes of humanity and the human spirit. When I awoke again I saw the same type of men who woke me two centuries prior, they were different beings but their souls were just as foul. This time they begged and pleaded for the salvation of humanity, a plea that held small seeds of truth. I blessed them with a taste of mutation, yet they wished for more still. In their eyes, I could see the same desire to control, the same greed and lust for power as before.” It said.

“So why are you awake now? Why don’t you return to your slumber?” Delilah asked.

“It seems the wind of fate awakened me in this crossroad of your choice; between freeing me or destroying me. If the infection you see in your fellow humans is allowed to spread and mutate, you will no longer have to fear the cold chill of ice and snow. If you destroy me, humanity will be on its own and forced to fend for itself for the remainder of its existence. You, child, can be the determiner of your species’ fate. The choice is yours child, but know that I see

something within you worth saving. I will not turn you away as so many others have. I will protect and shield you from the threat of this world.” It said.

As he spoke she could see that the pipes appeared to be hissing less, and his swarm seemed to be getting further and further with each attempt at escape. No doubt Robertson was already beginning the process of shutting down the furnace for repairs, the creature also realized this. The noise in Delilah’s ears began to grow louder and louder as the creature’s eyelids slowly slid shut.

Delilah suddenly snapped back to reality as if she had just woken up from a long nap, the creature before her remained still, its eyes closed and crusted shut. She could hear the massive pistons begin to cycle down, their thunderous thumps slowed with each cycle. Delilah looked again to the three levers and then back at the creature, and then down at Gungi, who still remained motionless, on his knees. If she pulled those levers, she’d kill the Plague Father and his foul power. If she didn’t pull the lever, how did she know that the creature spoke the truth? How did she know that as soon as the heat died down, it wouldn’t take its revenge on humanity like it did before? It claimed to be salvation but it could just as easily be the harbinger of humanity’s destruction. The first time it woke up, it unleashed an evil that eventually caused the freeze. The second time it horribly mutated and infected what was left of humanity with an incurable infection.

Did she really trust him? Could she really trust him? Was everything he said merely a lie to buy time for his release? The words it spoke addressed Delilah directly, down to her inner soul. When it spoke, she listened without a trace of anxiety or fear, a feeling so foreign to her that she only realized it now. She went from a street rat, to a wanted heretic and eventually the decider of humanity’s fate all in the span of a few days.

Her mind flew through the what if's and even then she found herself drowning in more questions than answers. Her heart beat through her chest in rhythm with the pistons far above her and she found herself wondering if she could even make such a choice. How could she make this choice? The fate of humanity rested on her shoulders alone and if she hesitated any longer, the creature would surely awaken fully. All she needed to do was pull three levers, a simple task with the weight of the world riding on it. Before meeting Dr. Barlow, no one asked what she wanted, or paid heed to any of her desires. She learned from a young age that in this world, the only person that will look out for you is yourself. Was it really selfish for her to allow the Plague Father out of his slumber? No one knew she was down here, Father Gungi probably didn't hear her judging from his lack of reaction or movement. Even if she did make the wrong decision, Delilah realized that there wasn't a right decision either.

She made her choice. Whether or not she'd live with the guilt of it for the rest of her life was a thought she pushed quickly from her mind. One day at a time, her entire life had been built around this mantra and she saw no reason to change it now. She didn't look back as she climbed the stairs back to the surface, the doubts in her mind faded like the heat from the furnace. With every step she moved quicker, soon taking the steps two at a time and then bounding up the stairs at a sprint. For once in her life, she didn't feel scared.

Wiping the sweat from her brow, Delilah stepped back to admire the sturdy metal anchor point of the new beacon. Within the maw of the arched metal dome, a heavy-duty winch slowly spun as more and more of the solid metal chord lifted from the ground. It took nearly a month since the overseer was overthrown and an entire greenhouse of cotton, but the balloon was finally ready. With its flame burning hot and the single light within the balloon's basket slowly

spinning, the balloon rose from the ground. Delilah stood amongst the engineers that designed and built the beacon, their hard work paying off as they watched the balloon float upward. It steadily gained height with each passing minute, floating alongside the central tower while it climbed. Eventually, Delilah watched as it surpassed the height of the tower, slipping through the plume of smoke at the top of the tower and rising above the crater's walls. The balloon drifted slightly eastward with the wind as it continued to rise up above the snow and icy wasteland. At its peak it reached nearly a mile into the sky, the light within its basket acted as a beacon for anyone nearby. In time, Delilah knew, expeditionary teams would use this beacon to lead them home after venturing into the endless sea of snow. For now, the beacon acted as a testament to humanity's strength, a light amid the darkness.

Amid the crowd of engineers Delilah smiled. It was something she hadn't done in quite some time, but she couldn't hold back the happiness from the triumph of this accomplishment. While the engineers cheered, clapped and hollered in celebration, a tall and lean man made his way through them. He stopped beside Delilah, the bottom of his cane knocked against the wooden boards beneath his feet.

"What was it you kept repeating to me during my recovery?" Dr. Barlow asked.

"One small step," Delilah responded.

"Well, it seems you've made our first small step outside the confines of the walls. I do wonder what you will think of next," Dr. Barlow pondered.

The two of them stood in silence besides one another, apprentice and teacher. Delilah looked sidelong at her mentor. His face was no longer the ghostly pale color when she first dragged him to Dr. Robertson on that fateful eve. As she drifted in her thoughts, the seven o' clock work whistle brought her back to reality.

“I’ll see you tomorrow for lunch Dr. Barlow,” Delilah said as she began to take off.

“Yes. See you then,” Dr. Barlow called after her, confused on where she needed to be in such a hurry.

With the excitement of the beacon’s launch, Delilah hadn’t paid attention to the time and now found herself running late as she made her way through the city. She made her way down first street before hooking right down an alley toward second street. Around her, the twelve hour shift workers made their way home, or to the nearest cookhouse to get some grub. On second street, she made her way to the one district she used to avoid at all cost: the religious district. Now, she ran down the street without fear of the inquisition or brutish monks of the church.

Delilah stopped before the great cathedral, a massive structure made of stone and metal. From what she knew, the cathedral took over five years to construct, and was made at the start of the freeze. Only a few citizens passed Delilah as she pushed open one of the great wooden doors that led inside. It felt almost eerie to Delilah as she entered the cathedral and saw only a handful of citizens inside, their heads bowed in prayer. She was aware that a month ago, this hall would be packed with citizens. Now, with Father Gungi mysteriously gone, and no one forcing nightly attendance, the halls were quiet and peaceful.

Candles were lit throughout the massive space, and dozens of pews all neatly faced the front of the cathedral. Delilah assumed this was where Father Gungi used to stand and deliver sermons to the masses. One or two of the people in the cathedral recognized Delilah and greeted her with warm smiles. Delilah returned their greetings as she made her way toward the front of the cathedral. Five rows from the altar, Delilah quietly sat down and bowed her head. Even though she had done this a few dozen times by now, the movement was still foreign to her. A month prior to this and she’d be executed on the spot for daring to come here without the

infection. She pushed aside these dreadful thoughts to clear her mind and she let out a long exhale from her nose. The world around her seemed to fade while her body felt weightless despite gravity's hold on her. After a few moments, her eyes slowly opened and she found herself somewhere else. The cathedral still remained around her, though the light was much dimmer. The other citizens that had been in the cathedral were now replaced by shadowy wisps in vague human shapes.

“So you have come to speak to me again Delilah. I do enjoy our talks,” a rumbling voice spoke.

Delilah raised her head, her gaze soon landing upon the Plague Father in all its putrid glory. It no longer sat upon the throne of copper, instead preferring to stand atop the extensive raised altar. Its eyes had returned to it, two dull orbs of golden yellow that stuck out from the excess of face flesh.

“I completed the beacon; it took flight just as you predicted. With the beacon raised we will be able to start sending out expeditionary teams to search for survivors,” Delilah said.

Father grinned. Beneath his lips, crooked teeth chewed on the buffet of maggots that filled his mouth. Delilah couldn't help but continue to wonder how he spoke so clearly with a mouth full of maggots.

“Good, good. When you send out the first expeditionary team you will give them these directions,” a pause as a thought popped into Delilah's head with precise directions. “I sensed the presence of wayward travelers out amidst the ice, they were tired from their search. In two days time they will reach the destination I have informed you of. There, they will wait. The expeditionary team you send out at dawn tomorrow will find them before it is too late,” it said.

“Yes Father,” Delilah responded.

A deep rumble of approval came from the depths of Father's stomach.

"You are troubled Delilah, what ails you? It is of your friend isn't it? The one who saved you?" It questioned.

"Yes, Father. I believe he deserves to know the truth of your existence. Without him, we wouldn't have met. His questioning of your existence was what led me to find you, and for you to find me," Delilah said.

This time, Father let out a long, slow, sigh.

"We have spoken of this Delilah. My existence needs to be kept secret. Many are lost now that the overseer and his lackeys are no longer ruling over them. It is best if the masses put their faith in their fellow man and learn to trust one another again. In time, this trust will lead to compassion, and this compassion will lead to selflessness. Humanity will become its own saviors without a need to rely on a mystic god," it explained.

As much as Delilah wanted to say otherwise, she found its argument reasonable. The belief in a mystic being could be used to divide a populous, just like Father Gungi did. Instead, she realized, it'd be better if humanity believed in its own strength.

For the next hour or so, Delilah sat and spoke with her father. They talked about what was happening in the city, what was the next step for the city, and about the greater future of humanity. Throughout their conversation, Delilah couldn't help but find comfort in her father's presence. His body may look like a rotting, putrid mound of flesh, but he talked with her in a way that made her feel wanted.

"You should return to the city, daughter. You should be around your fellow man, and deepen your bonds with them. With their trust in you, we will be able to safely guide humanity away from extinction," it said.

“I’m just one girl, father. You are the one who is helping to nurture humanity back to health, all I do is pass along your message,” Delilah responded.

A deep rumbling chuck responded to Delilah’s self-doubt.

“Do not forget, daughter, you were the one who awoke me fully from my slumber. You showed me a part of humanity that I thought extinct. My assistance is solely thanks to you. You may be just one girl, but something special hides within you. One of the reasons I made you my messenger was so that part of you could emerge and strengthen you,” it said.

“You never told me what that part of me is,” she responded.

“What sort of mystic being would I be if I told you all the answers?” It mused.

Before she could respond, Delilah snapped awake with a jolt. Her eyes slowly acclimated to the glow of candles around her. She filled her lungs with a deep breath of air and shook off the instantaneous return to reality. Nothing seemed to have changed around her. From the look of where everyone else was before her trip and after, it seemed as if only a moment had passed here. This lined up with her prior experiences and the way that time seemed stationary when she visited Father. A tinge of sadness welled up within her as she confirmed her suspicions of Father never being able to emerge from the self-imposed prison. To Delilah, it made sense that Father wanted to avoid interacting openly with humanity again. She still found it strange that she was the one chosen to bridge the gap.

She couldn’t help but wonder why Father trusted her and her alone. In his eyes she stood above everyone else in the city and yet she failed to find out why. Whenever she asked about it, Father avoided the question as if to force her to find out for herself. She had spent long hours thinking of this, and still couldn’t come up with a reasonable action. What was it about her that made her so special? Why was she the one that proved humanity was worth saving? How come

the divine being with all the answers repeatedly denied her the answer she so desperately wanted? A huff escaped her lips as she stood up from the pew and walked up the aisle toward the door. She paused at the door as she realized the irony in her frustration. This was exactly what Father had explained to her, she needed to rely on herself instead of the divine wisdom of some mystic creature. She could imagine Father's smile at her realization, and she couldn't help but smile in return. With that, she pushed open the door of the cathedral and entered a blossoming new world.